Does the Form Really Matter?

Leadership, Trust, and Acceptance of the Performance Appraisal Process

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This article reports the findings of a study on the attitudes of county government employees toward an existing performance appraisal system. Specifically, this study explores the role of trust in shaping supervisor and employee acceptance of the appraisal process. In addition, other, more traditional variables are explored, such as the perceived relevance of the appraisal form, length and complexity of the form, amount of training received on the appraisal system, and general level of understanding of the appraisal system. Findings indicate that the level of trust between the employee and supervisor is the most important predictor of acceptance of the appraisal system.

Keywords: *performance appraisal; trust; leadership; ethics*

Performance appraisal traditionally has two major purposes, broadly conceived as developmental and summative. Developmental approaches focus on enhancing employee performance by identifying opportunities for employee growth and marshalling organizational resources to support that growth. Summative approaches are judgmental in nature and are explicitly linked to extrinsic rewards such as promotions or pay (Daley, 1993; Moussavi & Ashbaugh, 1995).

Whatever the purpose, Carson, Cardy, and Dobbins (1991) proposed that performance appraisal makes three critical assumptions: Employees actually differ in their contribution to the organization, the cause of this difference is due (at least in part) to individual performance, and supervisors are actually able and willing to distinguish between performance attributable to individual performance and to other sources. These assumptions have been, and continue to be, challenged in the literature on performance appraisal (Bowman, 1999; Cook, 1995; Martin & Bartol, 1998; Roberts, 1998). Despite the problems with these assumptions and performance

appraisal in general, the public sector seems destined to continue the practice (Golembiewski, 1995).

This research seeks to explore an overlooked fourth assumption. Performance appraisal assumes that employees and supervisors accept the process as legitimate. In this study, legitimacy is defined in terms of whether employees believe the process adequately evaluates individual performance and rewards good performance. If they do, the summative and developmental purposes of appraisal will be fulfilled. Employees will respond to information received in the appraisal process and alter their behavior to receive promised rewards (promotion, pay, etc.). Supervisors, on the other hand, will use the processes to identify employee needs for development and fitness for promotion or additional pay. If employees and supervisors do not accept the performance appraisal process as legitimate, then its purposes are thwarted regardless of the quality of the instrument or the processes supporting it (Dipboye & Pontbriand, 1981; Hedge & Teachout, 2000; Landy, Barnes, & Murphy, 1978; Lawler, 1967).

This study seeks to measure employee and supervisor acceptance of the appraisal process and explore variables that may shape this acceptance. In line with recent research conducted by Hedge and Teachout (2000) and Gabris and Ihrke (2000), this study examines the role of leadership and trust in influencing acceptance of the appraisal process. Unlike these other studies, this research examined the role of a particular leadership approach, servant leadership, and proposes that trust serves as a moderating variable between leadership and employee attitudes toward the appraisal process.

ATTITUDES TOWARD PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

In keeping with research in applied psychology and communication (Dipboye & Pontbriand, 1981; Hovland, Janis, & Kelly, 1953; Landy et al., 1978; Nathan, Mohrman, & Milliman, 1991; Zand, 1972), Bowman (1999) concluded that the technique used in the appraisal process is not particularly important. He suggested that we acknowledge the essentially human nature of the appraisal process—a process shaped by human cognitive processes and one, therefore, subject to bias.

Murphy and Cleveland (1991) argued that an obsession with validity and reliability issues has led researchers away from examining other more important issues in the performance appraisal process. They proposed that "reaction criteria" (e.g., the perceived fairness or accuracy of the system) limit the effectiveness of any appraisal system. Second, "practicality criteria"

include widely recognized issues of time commitment, cost, and political acceptability. A third set of "decision process criteria" concerns the level of acceptance of the system by organizational members and the system's ability to facilitate organizational decisions. Taken together, these three sets of criteria significantly influence the success or failure of any performance appraisal process.

In keeping with this argument, a new line of research has emerged acknowledging the importance of employee and supervisor acceptance of the performance appraisal process. In a nationwide survey of municipal government personnel managers, Roberts and Pavlak (1996) found that human resource (HR) professionals understand the importance of acceptance to the success of the appraisal process. In their study, 89% of respondents recognized employee acceptance of the appraisal process was either very important or essential, and 98% of respondents felt supervisor commitment was very important or essential.

Lawler (1967) was the first to propose that attitudes about the fairness and acceptability of the rating system are influenced not just by the rating form but by both organizational and individual characteristics. Landy et al. (1978) found the perceived accuracy and fairness of an appraisal were predicted by the frequency of appraisal, the supervisor's knowledge of the ratee's duties and level of performance, and the amount of mutual goal setting. Dipboye and Pontbriand (1981) found that employee opinions of the appraisal system were shaped by the favorability of the appraisal, the amount of two-way communication in the appraisal interview, and the perceived job relevance of appraisal factors.

More recent research has introduced additional factors. For example, training in the system has been linked with attitudes toward the appraisal process (Martin & Bartol, 1998; Roberts, 1992; Roberts & Pavlak, 1996). Participation, two-way communication, and goal setting have also been found to be significant in predicting attitudes toward performance appraisal (Bobko & Colella, 1994; Nathan et al., 1991; Roberts, 1992; Roberts & Pavlak, 1996). Supervisors' attitudes toward the appraisal system are also influenced by practical issues, such as the ease of administration and the length and complexity of the form (Longenecker & Fink, 1999; Roberts, 1992). Similarly, employees expect to be rated on items actually related to the work they do; hence, relevance is important (Gabris & Ihrke, 2000; Roberts, 1992).

Although all of these factors may be important in shaping attitudes toward the appraisal process, they suffer from one common defect. Most previous studies have ignored the fact that performance appraisal is just one

incident in the ongoing relationship between supervisor and employee. When viewed from this broader perspective, it seems clear that whatever occurs in the appraisal process is conditioned by the nature of the interpersonal relationship between the two parties. Key to that relationship is trust. Indeed, two recent studies (Hedge & Teachout, 2000; Reinke & Baldwin, 2001) have found links between trust and attitudes toward performance appraisal. Therefore, the emerging literature on trust will be examined.

TRUST

Within the empirical literature, a number of definitions have emerged. Most can be categorized as deterrence or calculus-based trust or identification-based trust (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). Deterrence or calculus-based trust is based on consistency of behavior; that is, people do what they say they are going to do. The other type of trust, identification-based trust, is based on empathy. This occurs when people understand, agree, empathize, and take on the other's values (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996).

Lewicki and Bunker (1996) proposed that these types of trust occur in sequence. Relationships begin with deterrence-based trust. Over time, as communication develops and the parties get to know one another, relationships proceed to identification-based trust (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). Thus, perceptions of others' trustworthiness are largely history dependent (Kramer, 1999).

Various factors have been proposed as leading to conditions of trust. Hovland et al. (1953) proposed that credibility was based on the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the communicator. Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) proposed that to be perceived as trustworthy, leaders must exhibit ability, benevolence, and integrity. Ability refers to skills and competency needed within a particular arena and is clearly related to Hovland's concept of expertise. Benevolence is "the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor" (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 719). Integrity refers to the trustor's perception that the trustee believes in, and behaves in accordance with, an accepted set of principles (Mayer et al., 1995).

Behind all of these factors, though, looms leadership. Theory and empirical studies suggest that leadership, through its control of communication channels and work conditions, plays a major role in building organizational culture and trust. By fostering open communications, listening, being competent, predictable, caring, and ethical, leaders foster trust (Fairholm,

1994; Greenleaf, 1977). Gabris and Ihrke (2000) concluded that leadership credibility is a critical factor in the implementation of new performance appraisal systems. Thus, a specific and cogent aspect of leadership theory will now be examined.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

A complete review of leadership theory would take several books. For purposes of this research, however, only one leadership theory will be examined—servant leadership. This theory was chosen for two reasons. First, it has been empirically examined only once previously, in a currently unpublished study. Second, it is a theory, grounded in ethics, having as its stated goal the creation of an organizational culture of trust (Greenleaf, 1977).

Servant leadership is a values-based approach to leadership. It possesses three major characteristics: openness, vision, and stewardship. "Openness" can be defined as the degree to which leaders are empathetic, aware of needs of others, open to suggestions and ideas, and alert to employee input. "Vision" is the degree to which leaders plan and anticipate future needs, develop concrete mission or vision statements, and keep situations and problems in perspective. "Stewardship" is the degree to which leaders put the needs of others and the organization before their personal needs and are committed to the growth of employees and the organization. These three characteristics, which are quite similar to those proposed by other leadership theories, are said to create a culture of trust within an organization that in turn promotes organizational performance.

Both Greenleaf (1977) and Fairholm (1994) proposed that leadership seeks to build community in an organization. Leaders are charged with developing and fostering organizational value patterns and norms that respond to the needs of individuals and groups for order, stability, and meaning. Consequently, they recommend that leaders bring perspective, guiding principles, a clear statement of principles, and a sense of purpose to the organization. Greenleaf (1977) insisted that servant-leaders listen to and be aware of the needs of those within the organization, conceptualize a vision for the organization, become stewards of, and build the organizational community.

Although servant leadership is very similar to transformational leadership, there are a few crucial differences. For example, Bass (1996) and other theorists such as Hersey and Blanchard (1969) proposed that authoritarian styles may sometimes be appropriate. Greenleaf (1977) completely rejected

the use of coercive power. Moreover, Bass (1996) proposed that transformational leaders transcend their personal self-interests for either utilitarian or moral purposes. In contrast, Greenleaf (1977) stressed the moral component of leadership almost to the exclusion of utilitarian concerns. In this respect, Greenleaf's ideas are related to virtue ethics (Hursthouse, 1999) and to concepts of substantive justice (Rest & Narvaez, 1994).

With its emphasis on building community, servant leadership is a form of transformational leadership that seeks to build both the people within the organization and the organization itself. With its emphasis on the connection between the leader and followers, and the leader and the organization, servant leadership clearly rejects old ideas of leadership as a set of traits in favor of leadership as a relationship.

This study examines whether servant leadership and trust predict employee and supervisor acceptance of an existing performance appraisal system. In addition, such traditional factors as the perceived relevance of the rating factors, utility of the form, level of understanding of the system, and the receipt of training are evaluated as possible predictors of acceptance levels for the performance appraisal system.

METHOD

The study population consisted of the 651 employees of a suburban county in Georgia. The county is growing rapidly and is widely regarded as having progressive, competent, and highly professional leadership. Nonetheless, concern existed over the adequacy of its performance appraisal system. Originally conceived when the county was much smaller, the existing system consisted of one standard form with which all employees were rated, listing 11 behaviors that were evaluated on a simple 1 to 5 scale, with an additional form for supervisory employees. Before embarking on change, the county wanted to know how employees felt about the existing system. This study was undertaken to examine those attitudes and determine the sources of dissatisfaction (if any).

A survey consisting of 44 items was developed to find the answers to the county's questions. One item each was designed to test for level of understanding of the system, whether "socializing" with the supervisor affected ratings, and whether training had been received. However, only supervisors were asked about receipt of training. To find out if supervisors felt the existing form was easy to use (perceived utility), 2 items measured whether

supervisors felt the existing form was too complex or too long. The combined score formed the Perceived Utility scale. Respondents indicated their levels of agreement for these items on a standard 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, with 3 being the neutral score.

To test the perceived relevance of the 11 items evaluated on the current form, employees and supervisors were asked to rate how important each of the items was to their job performance on a scale of 1 to 5. Those scores were combined to obtain the Perceived Relevance scale.

To measure acceptance of the performance appraisal process, a scale comprising two questions was used. The first question examined whether employees or supervisors believed the current system adequately measured their individual performance. The second question asked if the existing system rewarded good performance.

To examine the roles of trust and leadership, a seven-item scale for Servant Leadership and a four-item scale for Trust were used. The Servant Leadership inventory was developed from the conceptual definitions presented previously. The Trust scale was adapted from previously published work (Reinke & Baldwin, 2001). Respondents indicated their levels of agreement with each of the items on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with 3 being the neutral score. The coefficient alphas for these two scales were .8649 for Trust and .8683 for Servant Leadership.

Because the county's interest was to learn the attitudes of all its employees, all 651 received surveys. A total of 254 responded, for a return rate of 39%. The demographics of the respondents mirrored the demographics of the total workforce.

FINDINGS

As expected, the findings indicated that employees and supervisors were not particularly pleased with the existing system. Only 31.4% of employees and supervisors agreed or strongly agreed that the existing system effectively measured their individual performance; 39.8% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Supervisors had even stronger feelings than employees. More than 55% of supervisors indicated they were displeased with the current system; only 15.6% agreed with the statement that they were pleased with the existing system.

Although in line with other research in this area, results were equally grim for other items. Almost half of respondents (46.8%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that the current system rewarded good performance;

only 27.8% agreed or strongly agreed. In other words, employees and supervisors lacked faith in the county's pay-for-performance program. Only 59.8% of employees and supervisors believed they understood the present system, and only 41.3% of supervisors agreed they had received training on the appraisal process. And 58.4% of respondents believed their rating was affected by socializing with their supervisors.

To test the proposed model, correlations were calculated for all the proposed independent and dependent variables. Because the variables measuring understanding of the system, receipt of training, and socialization were single-item ordinal scales, Spearman's rho was used to calculate the correlation coefficient. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 1. All the proposed independent variables were significantly related ($p < .05$) to the acceptance of the appraisal process, with the exception of socializing with the supervisor. Moreover, all relationships are in the expected direction.

To examine whether supervisory status, understanding of the system, receipt of training, and socializing with the boss affected acceptance of the appraisal process, ANOVA was conducted. This analysis demonstrated there was no statistically significant difference between supervisors and employees in levels of acceptance of the appraisal system. In addition, receipt of training was unrelated to acceptance levels. However, a feeling that one understood the system did lead to higher levels of acceptance of the appraisal system. Perceptions regarding socializing with the boss were also significantly related to levels of acceptance, but in an inverse manner as one would expect. The results of this analysis are in Table 2.

Moreover, to determine if gender or race had any effect on acceptance of the performance appraisal system, additional ANOVAs were conducted. There were no statistically significant differences in levels of acceptance based on gender or race.

Multiple regression was then used to test the cumulative effects of trust, servant leadership, perceived utility of the appraisal form, and perceived relevance of the rating factors on the dependent variable, acceptance of the performance appraisal process. As Table 3 indicates, unstandardized beta coefficients demonstrate that trust ($p < .01$) and the perceived utility of the form ($p < .05$) were the only significant predictors of acceptance of the appraisal process. This regression equation explained 25.2% of the variance in the dependent variable.

Additional regression analysis was employed to test the cumulative effects of these same independent variables, in one case for supervisors and in the other for employees. This was done because it seemed logical that employees might not be particularly concerned with the "perceived utility"

Table 1. Correlations Between Independent and Dependent Variables (*N* = 254)

	Acceptance of Appraisal Process	Relevance	Trust	Servant Leadership	Utility	Rating Affected by Socializing	Received Training	Understand System
Acceptance of appraisal process	1.000							
Relevance	.203**	1.000						
Trust	.478**	.248**	1.000					
Servant leadership	.430**	.180**	.839**	1.000				
Utility	−.148*	−.012	−.021	−.027	1.000			
Rating affected by socializing	.095	.107	.338**	.383**	−.110	1.000		
Received training	.222**	.033	.263*	.276*	.016	−.004	1.000	
Understand system	.260**	.167**	.164**	.190**	−.021	−.026	.445**	1.000

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 2. ANOVA Results With Acceptance of the Appraisal Process as the Dependent Variable ($N = 254$)

Independent Variable	Sum of Squares	F
Understand system		
Between groups	31.768	8.200***
Within groups	234.394	
Socializing with boss		
Between groups	10.559	2.567*
Within groups	240.644	

*$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 3. Regression Predicting Acceptance of the Appraisal Process (Supervisors and Employees, $N = 254$)

	Acceptance of the Appraisal Process	
Independent Variable	B	SE(B)
Constant	0.818	0.498
Trust	0.338	0.115**
Perceived relevance	0.133	0.096
Servant leadership	0.197	0.086
Perceived utility	−0.211	0.100
R^2	.255	
Overall F for equation	22.066***	

**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

of the performance appraisal form. The results were startlingly different. In the case of supervisors, the only significant predictor was the perceived utility of the form, accounting for 30.6% of the variance in the dependent variable, acceptance of the appraisal process. For employees, only servant leadership was a significant predictor, accounting for 30% of the variance in levels of acceptance of the appraisal process. The results of this analysis appear in Table 4.

Because the literature on leadership and trust suggest that these two are intimately connected, and the results of the correlation analysis suggest this literature may be correct, the moderating effect of leadership on trust was tested through the creation of an interaction variable—servant leadership times trust. However, to reduce multicollinearity between the interaction and independent variables composing the interactions, the measures of the variables in the interactions were centered around 0 before being regressed with the dependent variables (Aiken & West, 1991). This was accom-

Table 4. Regression Predicting Acceptance of the Appraisal Process (Supervisors and Employees Separately, N = 254)

| | Acceptance of the Appraisal Process | | | |
| | Supervisors | | Employees | |
Independent Variable	B	SE(B)	B	SE(B)
Constant	1.267	1.244	0.342	0.957
Trust	0.321	0.245	0.247	0.167
Perceived relevance	–2.476E-02	0.232	2.160E-02	0.141
Servant leadership	0.252	0.270	0.358	0.169*
Perceived utility	–0.249	0.119*	4.754E-02	0.317
R^2	.306		.300	
Overall F for equation	6.068***		12.833***	

*$p < .05.$ ***$p < .001.$

plished through subtracting the mean of an independent variable from the measures of the variable before multiplying the variables in the interaction together. Consistent with the original regression analysis, the unstandardized beta coefficients indicate that only trust ($p < .01$) and the perceived utility of the form ($p < .05$) were significantly related to the dependent variable, acceptance of the appraisal process. Overall, this regression equation explained 26.7% of the variance in the dependent variable.

DISCUSSION

A number of findings emerged from this study. First, in line with previous studies (Hedge & Teachout, 2000; Reinke & Baldwin, 2001), trust emerged as the most important predictor of an attitude toward a performance appraisal process, in this instance, acceptance of the process. This supports the literature suggesting that no analysis of performance appraisal is complete that does not acknowledge its essentially interpersonal nature (Bowman, 1999) and its place as part of the ongoing relationship between the supervisor and employee.

This does not mean that other factors are not important. The ANOVA conducted in this study supports the concept that a broad understanding of the system is essential to acceptance of the process. Therefore, whether done within the context of a formal training session or not, HR managers must ensure that employees and supervisors understand the performance appraisal system.

Furthermore, the negative effects of perceptions concerning socializing with the boss were also demonstrated. Clearly, perceptions that favoritism exists undermine employee and supervisor perceptions of the fairness of an appraisal process and therefore reduces acceptance. This finding lends support to provisions in organizational codes of ethics or in HR policies concerning the importance of appropriate professional relationships.

At its best, the variables proposed in this study explained 30% of the variance in levels of acceptance, leaving a large amount of variance unexplained. Future research should incorporate more variables, such as the last rating received, to help further our understanding of what affects acceptance of a performance appraisal process.

Perhaps the most startling finding of this study was the difference between supervisors and employees. Although there was no statistically significant difference in their levels of acceptance of the existing appraisal process, there were striking differences in the *predictors* of acceptance. Although this may not conclusively prove the adage "where you stand depends on where you sit," it certainly provides support.

For supervisors, the only salient variable was the perceived utility of the form. This result is consistent with Murphy and Cleveland's (1991) stress on the importance of practicality criteria and the results of other empirical research into the importance of the length and complexity of the form (Longenecker & Fink, 1999; Roberts, 1992). Supervisors, in other words, are more interested in the practical utility of the form than in the interpersonal issues surrounding appraisal. This may be a form of avoidance, but it points to a problem in the appraisal process. If interpersonal issues such as trust are as important as this and similar studies suggest, a supervisor's unwillingness or inability to acknowledge the importance of interpersonal issues can lead to misunderstandings and conflict in the appraisal process. In short, as part of the training program on the appraisal process, HR managers need to place increased focus on the interpersonal issues surrounding appraisal and less focus on such technical topics as "filling out the form."

The true magnitude of the problem is illustrated in the regression analysis involving employees. For employees, the only important predictor of their level of acceptance of the appraisal process was their perceptions of their supervisor's leadership. Specifically, employees who perceived their supervisors as more like servant-leaders were more likely to accept the appraisal process. This suggests that Gabris and Ihrke (2000) are correct that leadership behaviors play an important role in shaping employee attitudes toward the appraisal process.

How does leadership make a difference? The intriguing differences in the regression analyses in this study suggest a solution. When both employees and supervisors are included in the analysis, trust emerges as the most potent predictor of acceptance. When employees and supervisors are separated, trust disappears as a predictor but leadership emerges as the only significant predictor for employees. The high correlation between trust and servant leadership suggests the answer: From an employee's standpoint, trust and leadership may not be distinctly different. Rather, trust and leadership are deeply intertwined.

Such an interpretation is consistent with Kramer's (1999) conclusion that trust is a history-dependent process and Lewicki and Bunker's (1996) construct of successively deeper levels of trust. Leadership and trust coexist in a self-feeding cycle that moves either toward ever-deeper levels of trust or the complete breakdown of trust. The cycle is fueled by the participant's perceptions of the behavior of others in the relationship. The findings in the regression involving only employees suggest that leadership sets the stage for trust to emerge.

Finally, it is important to remember that the construct of servant leadership is a values-based approach to leadership. The emphasis this construct places on stewardship and ethics once again points to the importance of ethical behavior in an organization, particularly for supervisors. In short, ethics cannot be an afterthought in an organization. Instead, a concern with ethics, and particularly the fostering of stewardship, should form the cornerstone of a public organization's culture.

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