

## **Motivating the efficient**

### **Performance appraisal in government**

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The government is the biggest employer in the country. Its success ultimately depends upon how well or how badly its employees perform on their jobs. But does the existing system of performance appraisal enable the government to identify the strengths and weakness of its employees and to take corrective action by way of promoting the strengths and removing the shortcomings.

The answer is a definite 'no'. The system is not designed to improve the performance of the employees. It is used mainly as a means to discipline employees or as a source of collecting information required for certain administrative purpose, like taking decisions on promotion.

Most flaws in the existing system of performance evaluation in the government originate from a lack of clarity about basic objectives.

If one picks up any annual confidential report (ACR) form in use in a government department, one will notice a preponderance of personality-oriented traits like 'bearing', 'zeal', 'keenness', 'liveliness', 'loyalty', 'personality', 'patience', 'sobriety', 'resourcefulness', 'tact', 'temperament' etc. The job centered traits are either conspicuous by their absence or their number is insignificant. Considerable scope is left for the element of subjectivity to creep into the appraisal report.

Take, for instance, 'loyalty'. The assessment of such a trait may be coloured by the meaning that the reporting officer attaches to this term. In case his interpretation emphasises the personal loyalty of the employee towards him, it may result in his giving high grading to "yes men" in the department and low grading to those who are not loyal or dependable in that sense of the term.

### **Relevance Lacking**

In a study entitled "performance appraisal in the police", done by the bureau of police research and development in 1977, the traits figuring in the ACR forms of inspectors and sub-inspectors which were in use in 26 states and Union territories were analysed. The study revealed that out of 79 traits which were being evaluated, only 11 could be regarded as directly related to the police work! Out of 24 ACR forms analysed in the study, as many as eight did not contain even a single trait which had any direct relevance to police work. It was noticed that either the same form which had been prescribed by the state governments for all government servants was being used by the police department, or the performance of all non-gazetted ranks in the police was being assessed on the basis of one form.

The ACR forms designed for higher ranks are no better. For instance, it is astounding to note that the annual performance of the all-India service officers, irrespective of ranks or posts, is assessed on the basis of an identical form which contains merely three columns: 'state of health'; 'general assessment' and 'integrity'. To equate the performance factors relevant to a job in the police with those of a job in some other government department- like

health, education or forests- or not to make any distinction between the requirements of jobs at junior levels with those at seat junior levels with those at senior levels with the same department is surely illogical, if not absurd,

The technique which is used in government departments is close to what is known as the “graphic rating scale method”. At the end of every year, a confidential report form containing a list of personality of behavioural traits is presented to the rater, who is required to indicate the degree of the trait possessed by the employee by using pre-determined phrases or adjectives like ‘out-standing’, ‘very good’, ‘good’, ‘satisfactory’, ‘poor’, ‘above average’, ‘average’. The use of these summary expressions restricts the scope of the appraising officer to bring out the realities of employee performance.

The ACR form prescribed for all-India services does not require the appraising officers to use such expressions, but in their cases the entire evaluation is done under one broad heading of “general assessment”. When the grading is done on the basis of overall impression, it has a greater risk of being coloured by subjective considerations than the specific factors of traits-bound appraisal. It also does not provide a complete picture of the strengths and weakness of officer in respect of specific factors relevant to his job.

### **Overall Grading**

This summary overall grading is done in government departments for determining the promotional potential of the employee, but the degree of fitness for promotion is invariably considered again by departmental promotion committees. Besides being superfluous, this practice of doing overall grading misses one important point: no employee is either completely outstanding or absolutely poor in respect of all the performance factors relevance to his job; even if it were possible to grade some employees as ‘outstanding’ and some as ‘poor’, it would be extremely difficult to grade the performance two extremes. The distinguishing of those who fall in between these line between ‘outstanding’ and ‘very good’ or between ‘above average’ and ‘average’, for instance, is too thin to be drawn or distinguished clearly.

Considerable research has been done in the field of management to improve the traditional methods of appraisal in order to reduce the element of subjectivity. Not much use has been made by government departments of such research results. On a recommendation made by the administrative reforms commission many years ago, the government had introduced a method known as “self-appraisal method”. The method requires the employee to appraise his own performance, which is supplemented by a rating done by the supervisor. There are some obvious advantages of this method, but it is being used only in the cases of a few ranks. The method has not been adopted in the cases of all-India service officers.

At present, the evaluation report is written at the end of the calendar or financial year. Since no record is kept about the performance of the employee, the reporting officer is forced to evaluate either on the basis of his overall impression about the employee’s general performance or to fall back upon his memory. Two most common errors resulting from this practice are ‘halo error’, which arises when all the traits are assessed on the basis of an overall impression, and the ‘error of over-weighting’ which arises when the rater is unduly influenced by events nearer the end of the rating period.

Research says that it is possible to reduce the chances of some of these errors affecting evaluation reports provided effective use is made of another method-known as the “critical incidents methods”. This method requires the evaluation to be done on the basis of objective data about the performance of an employee collected in systematic and regular manner. A running record of specific, critical incidents indicating the employee’s good or poor performance is kept as they observed continuously throughout the year. It is only the observed performance which is required to be recorded and not the judgment or opinion of the rater about any particular trait.

### **Subjectivity Reduced**

The record can also be utilized periodically for the purpose of counselling subordinate officers about their performance and problems. The success of the method depends on the closeness and quality of supervision that is exercised and on a faithful and immediate recording of incidents as they are observed. Besides serving as an aide memoire to the reporting officer at the time of writing the appraisal report, the use of this method reduces the element of subjectivity by forcing the appraiser to base his report on recorded facts relating to performance rather than on subjective opinion about the quality of character traits.

A cardinal principle on which the modern approach to performance evaluation is based is that the results of appraisal must be intimated to the employee. If the objective of the system is to motivate the employees to improve their performance and to develop their growth potential, then it is necessary that they must be fully informed about the way their performance has been appraised by their superiors.

It is not as if the importance of feeding back to the subordinates the appraisal information is not recognised by the government departments. The system, as it exists, does recognise the need to communicate to them this information, but only in so far as it relates to the negative aspects of their performance. In other words, only that part of the report remains unknown to the subordinate which contains commendatory remarks about his behaviour and performance.

In case the entire report does not contain any adverse entry, the employee remains completely in the dark about how he has measured upto the standards of the job or to the expectations of his senior officers. What is not recognised in following this system is that the knowledge on the part of the subordinate that his good work has been appreciated by his seniors works as a highly motivational influence on him.

The system as it exists does more harm than good. While a good ACR does not motivate the subordinate to do better (as it remains unknown), a single bad entry in the ACR develops in him a feeling of grievance. The subordinate starts imputing motives to the reporting officer in his representation. This results in vitiating the atmosphere and in damaging inter-personal relationships.

Any attempt to improve the exiting system of performance evaluation in the government must start by redefining its basic objective. In so far as the operational philosophy of the system is concerned, it must not be merely reward and punishment. It should rather be aimed to improve the performance of employees.

