

The Solution Focused Appraisal Interview

More than ever management and employees face the challenge of achieving optimal performance to continue their own professional development and at the same time, to maintain levels of commitment and motivation at work.

The Appraisal Interview is a management tool which has the potential to respond to this enormous challenge in a highly effective and sustainable way. At its heart is the deliberate idea of interrupting the normal working relationship between management and employee.. It enables people to step out of their highly pressurised daily working environment once or twice a year, where lack of time is always an issue, and view the previous and coming year from a helicopter perspective.

How does it work?

Manager and employee agree to certain dialogue guidelines and arrange to meet for about two hours. In the first part of the exchange they take stock of critical areas of work and different experiences they have had during that year:

- How did the employee manage to achieve agreed targets?
- Where are his/her strengths, and what are the areas for development?
- How satisfied are manager and employee with their co-operation and with their working relationship?

The second part looks forward, with the manager informing the employee of the likely challenges facing him/her and the company. On the basis of this review and their joint summary they set agreed targets for the coming year as well as measures for the employee's professional support and development.

In this way the appraisal interview works as a management tool on three levels: it guides the process towards achievement, develops the employee's potential and shapes the working relationship between manager and employee.

The appraisal interview is always and fundamentally about consolidating what works and initiating change for the better concerning problem issues.

Where's the catch?

It is certainly true that managers often find themselves in a dilemma when they have to address critical areas or problems. If they avoid addressing the problem the dialogue can remain at an unsatisfactory and superficial level. No change comes about. On the other hand, if they try to analyse the roots of the problem the employee can quickly feel criticised, and can go on the defensive or try to justify his or her behaviour. (page 31) The conversation then revolves around "who is to blame?" and the atmosphere becomes strained.

It's exactly at this point that the dilemma arises for managers. If they confront the problems and conflicts directly the exchange can often become difficult and further conflicts may arise. On the other hand, if they avoid addressing these delicate issues the exchange remains shallow and superficial, and doesn't lead to the hoped for outcome.

The way out: The Solution Focused Appraisal Interview (SFAI)

This is where the solution focused process is effective. Instead of analysing the past problem and deriving a solution from it, the solutions focus confines itself to the **current effects** of the problem. A future orientated approach is introduced and this activates the employee's latent problem solving ability, which is always present beneath the surface.

The solution focus ensures that in the first part of the dialogue the employee's successes and strengths are highlighted. This reinforces what is already working and validates it accordingly. If problems and conflicts are handled in a solution focused way then the process stays consistently focused on the future solution:

- "What do you think should go better next year?" (Instead of "What didn't go well; what was difficult?")
- "How would our co-operation/ our working relationship look if it was going even better?" (Instead of "What was unsatisfactory?")
- "How can we optimise your performance?" (Instead of "Why didn't it work?")

Instead of asking questions to work out the problem– and in the process all too easily ending up with apportioning blame – the thrust is towards articulating ideas, wishes and images centred on a solution.

The solution focus framework enables both manager and employee to address awkward subjects and discuss them constructively.

Agreed targets – stepchild of appraisal interview

Another painful experience of many managers (and employees) occurs in the area of target setting, where the effort each side puts in doesn't really pull towards the goal.

Agreed targets are often formulated so that the employee only sees the additional effort and work involved – and the energy level sinks like a stone.

Here too the solutions focus approach is significantly different. Targets worked out through this process describe the outcome achieved, as if the goal had already been reached. The quality of the outcome becomes tangible. The desired direction becomes clear, and this gives rise to the impulse **towards** the goal, thus releasing energy for action.

What must managers be able to do?

To enable managers to pose solution focused questions consistently they are supported by solution focused guidelines in the first part of the exchange. In the second they are directed towards a series of solutions focused targets agreed between them and the employee.

For businesses already working with appraisal interview this presents a valuable opportunity to breathe new life into the process and strengthen its impact in the workplace. For those businesses new to appraisal interview the Solution Focus makes the effective use of this tool more likely right from the beginning.

We have many years of experience in business consultancy as well as in management training. We would be glad to advise you on the introduction and development of the **Solution Focused Appraisal Interview**.

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"In our company we place a premium on well qualified staff, not just amongst our associates, but across the whole ZAT Management. To promote our culture of management development we have chosen The Solution Focused Appraisal Interview. It allows even difficult situations to be addressed in a very constructive and helpful manner. What speaks to me in particular is that we never need to apportion blame."

Gerald Ebner
Managing Director

Contact



Andrea Graf (MA) and Susan Zecha (MA) have many years of experience between them as specialists in the solutions focused approach to business consultancy, coaching and training.

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