

Just tell us what you want! Using rubrics to help MBA students become better performance managers

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Abstract:

Can the use of rubrics in a Masters of Business Administration class help students become better managers of employee performance? Managing employee performance is central to the role of a manager, yet research indicates that employees and managers struggle with issues related to the management of employee performance. Many of these issues center on the lack of clear communication to employees from managers about performance expectations prior to performance and on not providing the employees with helpful feedback consistent with the articulated performance expectations. In addition, there is growing concern about managers' reliance on formal performance appraisals as the primary tool to manage employee performance as performance appraisals are often more focused on measuring past performance than encouraging future performance. This paper explores the use of shared and unshared rubrics for Master of Business Administration (MBA) students' assignments to encourage current, new, or aspiring managers to consider the importance of establishing and sharing detailed performance expectations with their employees prior to performance. MBA students actively seek information on the performance criteria for assignments. They are interested in learning as much as possible about the criteria for assignments and they prefer to have this information prior to completing the assignments. This paper describes how providing rubrics to MBA students and engaging students in discussions that link and illustrate the similarities between students and employees needing clearly articulated performance criteria may help prepare current, new, and aspiring managers to engage in better performance management.

Key Words:

employee expectations, management education, performance appraisals, performance management, rubrics.

Preparing for the Profession of Management

Managers need to be able to set and share performance expectations with their employees. Performance management skills are very valuable in the workplace, yet these skills can be a difficult challenge for many managers. Many current, new and aspiring managers seek to improve their management skills by participating in Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs. As such, many management professors seek opportunities to link what is learned in the classroom to the managers' workplace.

In preparing future managers, it is important to encourage MBA students to apply what they have learned about the value of articulating and sharing employee performance expectations into their role as managers. What pedagogical strategies may encourage MBA students to become more aware of the need to clarify and articulate their expectations of their employees' performance in the workplace and assist them in improving their performance management skills? This paper describes the use of shared and unshared rubrics and related class discussions to raise MBA students' awareness of factors related to effective performance management.

Performance Management and Performance Appraisals in the Workplace

Effective managers are able to maximize the contributions of their employees. Over the last two decades, there has been an increased focus on the employees' role in improving organizational performance. This focus has led to an increased interest in the process of identifying, measuring, and developing the performance of employees by concentrating on performance management initiatives.

Performance management is a systematic range of activities engaged in by organizations to enhance the performance of employees. Included within this range of activities are performance planning, establishing objectives and goals, feedback, reward strategies, performance appraisals, training initiatives, and career plans (Biron, Farndale, & Paauwe 2011). Although performance management is most effective when the activities are truly systematic and applied in appropriate and balanced cycles, some activities in performance management are utilized with much more frequency than others. Performance appraisals, also known as performance reviews, are one of the most widely utilized performance management tools (Mani 2002). Performance appraisals are widely considered to be a means of measuring and communicating employee job performance (Murphy & Cleveland 1995). However, for many organizations, performance appraisals are the only performance management tool utilized to provide structured information about performance to employees (Biron, et al., 2011).

A simple definition of performance appraisal is "a measuring of job performance" (Kavanah, Benson, & Brown 2007). In practice, performance appraisals generally involve both a measurement and evaluation of employee performance and a meeting between the employee and manager to review the measurements and evaluative comments (Aguinis 2009). The performance appraisal, and in particular, the performance appraisal meeting is considered to be pivotal in performance management. While the performance appraisal is considered an essential component of performance management, it is also the most vulnerable. Aguinis (2009) found that a majority of

managers and employees are apprehensive about performance appraisals and this can frequently lead to avoidance of or poor outcomes for the performance appraisal process and this can compromise the entire performance management process.

While the interest in managing employee performance continues to increase, so does the concern by researchers and managers about the overall effectiveness and fairness of these initiatives, especially those related to performance appraisals. Further, there is a strong potential for inconsistent appraisal results from managers and insufficient understanding of performance expectations by employees because of a lack of clear and shared performance standards (Biron, *et al.*, 2011). Too frequently, performance appraisals supplant ongoing and relevant communication and feedback to employees (Heathfield, 2007). Further, annual performance appraisals are often focused on the employees' previous performance with less attention given to clarifying future expectations. Nickols (2007) found that performance appraisals generally have specific information or "performance traits" that are used to address past behavior, but the forward-looking component of the performance appraisal is often less detailed and somewhat ambiguous. This ambiguity along with other factors can lead to "performance erosion" and damage employee morale. These are just two of the many "soft costs" identified in many performance appraisals (Nickols 2007).

Evans and McShane (1988) describe the need for identifying conditions under which a performance appraisal is most likely to be effective. Herrera (2003) argued that most employees are "surprised" by many of the expectations outlined on their performance appraisal and the employees view this practice to be unfair and can lead to resentment of the process and the manager. Establishing a performance appraisal process that is perceived as fair by the employees is considered to be the most important factor in building an effective performance appraisal process (Biron, *et al.*, 2011). To be perceived as fair by employees, the performance appraisal process must include transparency and knowledge of the process including adequate, timely, and unambiguous information regarding performance expectations (Biron, *et al.*, 2011). In the January 2012 issue of *Managing People at Work*, managers are advised to continuously clarify expectations with employees and to ensure employees have complete access to their performance expectations. This is believed to increase the likelihood that employees will be receptive to feedback received from their managers. In addition, Cawley, Keeping, & Levy (1998) argued that to be reliable and effective, employee performance appraisals must be "accepted and supported by the employees" and providing clear information about expectations prior to performance will increase the likelihood of employee acceptance.

While employee acceptance is important, employee engagement and commitment are even more valuable to the workplace. Knowing performance expectations is one of the most powerful predictors of employee engagement. Employees who report that they know the performance that is expected of them are more productive and experience higher employee satisfaction level than employees who are unsure of their expectations (Wagner & Harter 2006).

Rather than relying heavily on performance appraisals or any subset of performance management activities, organizations should focus on building a performance-based culture to complement any performance management system (Graham 2004). A

performance-based culture provides opportunities for employees to learn the performance expectations that apply to them and consider how these expectations are linked to the larger organizational goals. Graham (2004) recommends that employees and managers work regularly and cooperatively to verify and behaviorally describe performance expectations and include the levels or frequency of the behavior necessary to meet or exceed managers' expectations. These contextually rich conversations could serve to improve both the employee performance and the resulting performance appraisal. It is important not to obscure the distinction between opportunities to communicate to and develop and share specific employee performance criteria and the opportunity to evaluate the performance. Communication of and agreement on these expectations prior to performance evaluation is key.

Rubrics as Communication and Assessment Tools

According to Stevens and Levi (2005), a rubric is a tool that clearly articulates the expectations for student performance on an assignment. A rubric divides assignments into smaller components and provides a description of acceptable and unacceptable levels of performance within each component of the assignment. It is possible for a student to exceed expectations in one component of the assignment, but perform at an unacceptable level in another component of the assignment. Because rubrics describe compartmentalized levels of performance, they can promote learning, as well as improve feedback and information sharing on specific standards (Hanna 1998).

Rubrics serve multiple purposes for both faculty and students. For faculty, rubrics can serve as a planning and clarifying tool for developing assignments, as a communication tool for describing assignment expectations to students, as a framework for providing a common language for student feedback, and as consistent and reliable evaluation tool when grading student performance. For students, rubrics can be a valuable communication tool. Rubrics can provide clearly articulated expectations on the levels of performance necessary on an assignment by defining and describing their professor's expectations. Further, students may use rubrics to function as a guide or planning tool for completing assignments.

McKeachie and Svinicki (2006) found that through the process of developing a rubric, many faculty improved the quality of the assignment. Additionally, faculty believed they had provided the students with a clearer understanding of how their performance was graded through the use of a rubric. McKeachie and Svinicki (2006) believe that rubrics provide the opportunity for multiple raters to participate in the assessment process with increased consistency in the assessment results. Stevens and Levi (2005) noted that students feel less threatened by assignments that include a clear and carefully constructed rubric and this is especially true when students had an opportunity to discuss the rubric with the faculty.

The key to using a rubric as a communication and planning tool for students requires the student to be introduced to the rubric *prior* to completing the assignment. Further, students need to have a clear understanding of what the components of the rubric are measuring and what the performance measures specifically mean (Stevens & Levi 2005). Consequently, it is important for faculty to engage in discussions with the

students about the performance and identify specifically what performance and what level of the performance is expected.

Developing a rubric through a primary trait analysis can be very effective (Walvoord & Anderson 1998) in clearly identifying performance measures. This enables the faculty member to consider exactly what performance is expected of the students and what levels of performance would be necessary to meet, exceed, or fall below the professor's expectations.

Rubrics to Support Performance Management

There is an inherent value in the articulation of performance expectations in rubrics that may be applicable to the workplace. Further, there are similarities between rubrics utilized in an MBA program and measures used for clarifying and articulating employee performance expectations in the workplace. The similarities include both the importance of sharing clear performance standards and the importance of sharing those standards prior to the performance. As discussed, rubrics serve as an effective framework to communicate, plan, and discuss performance expectations. Clarifying and sharing these expectations with employees through both written and conversational forums can be valuable and energizing for employees when discussed *prior* to performance and may assist in building and maintaining a performance-based culture. This process could be especially effective when initiated as a component of a larger performance management system. To effectively manage employee performance, managers must be able to communicate clear expectations to employees, evaluate the performance, and provide relevant and helpful feedback. Rubrics created for the workplace that are shared prior to performance can serve as a vehicle for managers to communicate performance expectations, evaluate performance consistent with the expectations, and provide relevant feedback for the employees.

MBA Students and the Teachable Moment on Performance Management

Most of the MBA students at Saint Xavier University's Graham School of Management are employed fulltime and take MBA classes in the evening and / or weekend. The MBA program generally takes two or three years to complete, depending on the students' course load. Management Theory and Application is one of the first required courses our graduate students take as part of the MBA Program. The purpose of the Management Theory and Application course is to examine the effective management of people in organizational settings. The students in the Management Theory and Application course are often current, new or aspiring managers hoping to improve their managerial skills. Within this course, a pedagogical strategy involving the use of shared and unshared rubrics are used to link the MBA students' experience with rubrics to managing employee performance.

On the first evening of class, along with receiving the course syllabus, students are introduced to several detailed rubrics to guide and assist them as they complete their assignments throughout the term. As earlier stated, a rubric is a tool that clearly specifies student performance expectations. The rubrics that are shared with the students are in addition to the more general information about the assignments that is found on the course syllabus. The general information about assignments on the

syllabus may include an overview or brief description of the assignments, due dates, and the points possible for the assignments. In addition to this general information, the students are given a rubric for every significant assignment in the course *with the exception* of an assignment due the last week of the term. The omission or not sharing of this specific rubric is an intentional pedagogical strategy, but nothing about this is discussed with the students at this time. Questions about this *missing* rubric will inevitably be raised by the students later in the term

The rubrics shared with the students on the first evening include detailed and clear descriptions of the assignments and the varying levels of performance categorized and delineated. There are descriptions of the levels of work that would be associated with full points, partial points, and no points for the assignments. The rubrics also delineate several components of each assignment. For example, the rubric may include descriptions of citing research, linking concepts to current workplace challenges or experiences, or designing practical applications of specific concepts.

On that first night of class and for the first few weeks of the term, students are very focused on the rubrics that have been shared. Students frequently comment on the first night of class and especially as they begin submitting assignments, that they are very appreciative of the information provided by the rubrics. Students' comments range from general appreciation "the rubric is really helpful" to their specific uses "I keep the rubric in front of me when I am doing the assignment". Because the students have experienced the support and guidance of the rubrics associated with the earlier assignments, they are now aware that the rubrics are useful to them.

As noted earlier, as a pedagogical strategy, a rubric for the last assignment of the term has not yet been shared with the students. Early in the term, the students do not realize that no rubric has been shared for the final assignment. However, after a few weeks have passed and some assignments are now completed, students start preparing to work on assignments that are due at the end of the term. At about the mid-point of the term, when the students begin planning their work for the last few assignments, they realize they have not received a rubric for the last assignment.

At about this point, a little more than halfway through the term, students begin to ask questions about the *missing* rubric and will soon begin to directly request a rubric for that last assignment. When the students request a rubric for the last assignment, they are asked to explain why a rubric is necessary. They respond that rubrics "help guide them to meet the requirements of the assignment" or sometimes they observe that the rubrics "make the expectations clear" and often state "the rubrics help determine the level of work". For example, with the rubric, they know what the expectations of their performance are for submitting an *Excellent* assignment compared to what would be considered a *Good* or *Average* assignment.

After the students have made a strong case about their need for the important information contained within the rubric, they are then asked about the timing of sharing a rubric for this upcoming assignment. For example, it is suggested that the rubric may be shared with them when final grades are submitted. Predictably, the students do not support this suggestion. They point out that receiving the information on performance expectations *after* the assignment is completed is not helpful. They need to have the

expectations discussed and clear prior to their performance on the assignment. At some point in the discussion, a student will suggest an appropriate and logical solution, “Just tell us what you want”. The students will explain that if they know what is expected of them, they can then do the work. That shared observation becomes a very teachable moment. At that moment, everyone agrees that the detailed information within a rubric is important and that the rubric or description of expectations needs to be provided prior to performance. This conversation about rubrics and the students’ requests for clear and timely information on their performance serves as an insightful introduction for the class discussion on *Performance Management in the Workplace*.

Linking the Teachable Moment to Performance Management

During class, after the students have received the final assignment’s rubric, the value and timing of sharing rubrics has been discussed, the class discussion turns to similarities between rubrics and performance management. An effective performance management strategy, similar to the effective use of rubrics, requires clear information on expectations and levels of performance. Equally important, these expectations need to be shared prior to the performance. Also during class, student groups practice creating *workplace rubrics* for specific jobs at the students’ workplaces. For example, one group may develop a rubric for writing monthly financial reports for a banking institution while another group may create a rubric on documenting patient care for a healthcare institution. Students delineate what level performance in each category would be considered *superior*, *acceptable*, or *unacceptable* in their workplace. They also discuss the importance of using the rubric as a *conversation starter* with employees well in advance of a performance appraisal or review. Students enjoy this exercise and have commented that they are “more aware of the need to share job-related information with employees prior to the employees’ performance”. Other students have observed that they “wished their managers’ would use some sort of rubric to clarify their expectations at work”. Some students will discuss the frustration of not being certain what their manager expects from them. Recently, a student who manages a department of nine employees shared the workplace rubric created by her MBA group with her staff at work. She reported to her class group the next week that she, as their manager, had been making “too many assumptions” about what her staff knew about their jobs and was planning a meeting with them to discuss their differing assumptions. It is these types of valuable conversations that can help improve performance management skills.

Managers need to consider the importance of establishing and sharing detailed performance expectations with their employees prior to performance. This exercise provides an opportunity for MBA students to experience the importance of receiving and sharing clear expectations. Instead of simply teaching about performance management and explaining the need for communicating clear expectations, this need is modeled for and experienced by the MBA students through the use of rubrics. These MBA students now have an appreciation for and direct experience with receiving and providing detailed performance expectations prior to performance. Again, effective managers are able to maximize contributions of their employees and communicate expectations to employees. Through this experience, these current, new and aspiring managers are better prepared to communicate with employees and *just tell them what they want*.

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