

There are few parts of a manager's job that result in more discomfort than preparing for and conducting the annual performance appraisal interview. For many managers, just the thought of discussing employee performance results in feelings of apprehension, heart palpitations, and sweaty palms. The causes aren't hard to understand.

## The reasons for dread

- The time it takes to collect the necessary information, fill out the paper work, and meet with each employee usually has to fit into a schedule that is already jammed to capacity.
- Managers feel inadequately trained to assess employee performance fairly. Training is generally focused on teaching the manager how to fill out the appraisal form. Research indicates that the most poorly conducted part of the appraisal process is the interview with the employee. They often find themselves in the position of assessing vague characteristics, such as attitude, enthusiasm, and potential. Not only do serious questions exist as to a manager's ability to describe the difference between a good and a bad attitude, but also there is limited validity to this type of judgment legally as it relates to job performance.
- Employees generally dislike this time of year too. It is not surprising that they are uncomfortable being judged. Most of us believe we do a good job; that is the basis of our self-esteem as adults. So think how discouraging it must be to receive a perfunctory performance evaluation, based on vague criteria, during a short interview once a year. Some employees don't even realize that the comments their managers make in a short informal meeting are considered the actual appraisal and are later filed in the personal records.
- Defensiveness and nervousness on the part of both the manager and the employee can set the grounds for an interview that has little open discussion. One employee's manager said her performance "had been good but she hadn't walked on water," so she was being given an average rating. Given that situation, it's understandable that an employee would become defensive.
- For the employee, probably the most discouraging aspect of the annual assessment is that frequently it is the only time of the year the manager gives any feedback. The major reason performance appraisals fail to change employee behaviour is that the feedback is too little too late.

The good news is that by improving the way the performance appraisal system is applied, managers can make it a process that benefits the employee, the manager and the organization. Learn more about how to apply your performance appraisal system by reading, "Why You Shouldn't Dump Appraisals" in this issue.