

The Art of the Appraisal

by Julia Gaspar-Bates

The complexities of navigating a new system are challenging for any expatriate manager who has recently arrived in the U.S. The fast-paced and highly mobile American work environment means that retaining employees is given higher priority than might be the case in France where job mobility is less common. In the U.S., employees are frequently lured away by the promise of a higher salary, a more prestigious position—or merely due to lack of on-the-job appreciation that creates frustration and leaves the employee feeling unmotivated and resentful.

Performance appraisals are one of the intricacies the new manager must decipher. In France, it is unlikely staff will receive positive feedback for a job well done. Rather it is more common to highlight a problem and the manager's role is to point out what went wrong and provide directive on what needs to be done to rectify it. Because of the authoritarian structure of French management, an employee would expect a direct approach and reprimand, whereas receiving a sugar-coated reaction could be perceived as weakness on the part of the manager.

In the U.S., this controlled practice would be frowned upon and would leave the employee feeling micro-managed and indignant. Since individual empowerment and innovation are de rigueur, an employee would expect a certain amount of leeway to find a resolution to the problem on his/her own before presenting the results to the boss. There would also be an expectation of praise once a difficult issue is resolved to acknowledge the employee's hard work or creativity in finding a solution. This will not only reinforce the importance of quality work in the future but also help keep the employee motivated. American subordinates expect words of praise such as "great job" and "keep up the good work" and may feel slighted and under-appreciated if they are not given. While a French manager may find such comments superfluous and an over-emphasis on the positive attributes unnecessary, this is a key motivator for many Americans.

With the practice of Management by Objectives (or MBO), Americans are given a central role in their professional growth. Unlike in France where the manager gives the quarterly or annual evaluation, in the U.S. self-analysis of one's job performance is common. This practice provides the employee responsibility in assessing his/her work and in helping map out objectives for the future. The manager then uses this analysis, which is usually completed by the subordinate prior to a face-to-face meeting with the manager, as a basis for discussion. The manager should always start out with the positive attributes and accomplishments before launching into the areas that need improvement. This sets the stage for a more open dialogue between the two and lessens the chances of defensiveness on the part of the subordinate. While focusing on negative aspects of one's work is always uncomfortable, the notion of "constructive criticism" is often more palatable for a subordinate who may seize this as an opportunity to grow and improve performance.

Thus, increasing awareness of different styles of appraisal across cultures will help a French manager step back and assess how performance feedback might be interpreted by an American subordinate. Since communication is the root of many cultural misunderstandings, clearer insight into expectations and a slight adaptation of one's style can go a long way in strengthening a relationship between a manager and subordinate.