feature

Delivering Tools for Workforce Change

By Paul Meyer, Ascentis

Perhaps never before has the role of HR been changing more than today. Not only is our workforce changing, it's bringing in a new generation of not only "technology-aware," but "technology-dependent," individuals who demand we respond. Over the years, we've seen a wave of changes from casual Friday to casual every day, from vacation days to unlimited PTO, flex hours to working from home, and coming full circle with companies who give no reviews, to regular reviews, and back to no annual reviews. Anyone who is not aware of how much this new workforce influences our policies is due to receive their own performance improvement plan (PIP), if they haven't changed that process already as well!

And, of course, that increased responsibility to adapt likely does not come with an increased HR budget.

The new reality is that goals and priorities change (perhaps not at the top, but in the lower level goals required to get to the top). Training is changing; the use of competencies is changing. And, in a growing company (or a shrinking one), positions change.

So, perhaps the most crucial change is HR's willingness not only to accept it, but to embrace it.

Don't just listen to the Business – "Listen."

For those who have actually been listening the past year (or 20), business has been sending a very strong message: "We need more tools to develop our employees." What they need are things that save time. They want things to help them and their teams do their job better, not take them away from their job. And, those things needed to be simple. In 2015, technology should not require training, documentation and help screens. It should be practical and actually facilitate the change, because change is the new normal. And, by definition, growing companies are changing. So, it's important to not just listen to the business requirement, but also ensure that whatever is done is practical. Processes not fundamentally intuitive will be rejected (either publicly or privately). So, everything the organization does must help the business stay focused on growing the business, not on mandating new tools and programs with new learning curves.

As an example, when the business says they need to teach their managers to give more regular feedback, they are not asking to do more regular formal reviews. They want tools that make it easier to record feedback or provide more on-demand ratings or training.

Change Your Perspective from Push to Pull.

Instead of trying to force employees to comply, why not try to provide tools that make it easier to do what you want and need them to do? If you want managers to provide more real-time feedback, make that process easier through mobile tools. If more accurate goals and better goal alignment is key, then make it easier for managers to access and update their goals (and their direct reports' goals) in real-time, or as part of team meetings. The more you make it easy for managers to monitor their teams' goals, the more accurate the goal information will be. The easier you make it to find the training an individual needs, link it to key skills, and filter out irrelevant training, the more the courses will be accessed. And, the easier you make it to find relevant competencies to rate, rather than trying to force the rating of competencies not relevant to the individuals performance needs (which then requires excruciating detail), the more likely the competency will be rated and rated accurately. For example, if you have an individual who has difficulty with listening skills, make it easier to find all skills related to listening, and then automatically recommend training.

Change What You Monitor.

As the saying goes, you can't manage what you don't measure. So, why not monitor the behaviors you're trying to change, and show the correlation of performance to the behavior?

If you want managers to provide more regular feedback, why aren't you using tools to monitor the employees who are and aren't providing (digital) feedback?

If you want managers to quickly record sub-par behavior before it becomes an issue, why aren't you providing tools to record those opportunities easily, and then monitor who is or isn't providing feedback and training afterwards? Additionally, provide reminders to take action and update the rating. Then show the impact of performance to the feedback that has been left.

And, if you want to encourage managers to reward successes and acknowledge mentors, why aren't you monitoring which managers are regularly recording accomplishments for their individuals?

Change Your Approach to Competencies.

Many companies try to limit their competencies to a short list of core and/or leadership competencies for reviews. Other companies try to architect large competency libraries for every role. This can be time and cost-prohibitive to create, require a tremendous amount of change management, and, ultimately, may still not hit the mark.

Why not start with a short list of the critical competencies for jobs or job families, and then add and remove as needs arise. The key is to not over-engineer, nor over-define. If you don't plan to manage the skills, don't force the rating of them. And, as position needs require it, add the competencies.

For example, rather than over-engineering a list of sales competencies, create a simple list of the skills that sales management believes are contributing to their top sales peoples' success, as well as those that they believe are holding back performance. Then, create a simple dashboard to monitor those skills until behavior improves. That allows the company to focus on what matters and grow the library over time as adoption increases.

Change Your Source for Training.

Large companies have experienced shrinking development teams; small companies don't have one. So, why are organizations still suffering with either limited training, or spending disproportionate time and money trying to create massive training programs? Why not leverage what is readily available, both internally and externally?

There is a plethora of online training available today, much of it free or at very attractive subscription rates. Why not use tools which make it easy to load, link to skills, promote, track usage, and then gain feedback through user ratings?

Authoring tools continue to emerge and improve, allowing anyone to turn presentations and simple videos into sharable content object reference model (SCORM), Aviation Industry Computer-Based Training Committee (AICC), or Tin Can API trackable training with a short quiz to test comprehension.

Training has gone from being a project to something that can be created whenever needed. After all, training happens in an "ad hoc" and informal fashion constantly within our companies. We're just not recording it. Tools must allow for the rapid creation of training, whether it's recording a presentation on a laptop or simply uploading a 5- to 10-minute training course recorded with a smartphone. Our technology should leverage the tremendous knowledge already present in our workforce.

As an alternative to architecting the perfect training program, why not consider the following approach: Identify the mentors of specific skills as mentioned above, and allow those mentors to find or create and record their own training which can be attached to the skills. By decentralizing training, you get employees more involved and grow a library of training faster.

Don't Change the Goal, Change the Plan.

It's routine practice for companies to establish corporate and departmental goals each year. More and more companies are implementing ways to either cascade goals down, or align goals upward. But, don't assume that just because you create goals for the year, that plans don't change. Ultimately, changing the priorities of teams often is not reflected in the system because of the difficulty in recording those changes.

Why not provide tools that allow managers and employees to modify goals and simply notify and track those changes? If goal setting tools were used to more effectively manage your priorities in real-time, the information collected in those systems will naturally increase.

Could your goal-planning tools be used to more effectively conduct team meetings? Or, are your goals out of alignment with where our teams are spending their day-to-day activities? The more you allow the tools to reflect the realities of day-to-day activities, the more they will become part of your routine.

Change How You Prioritize Goals.

Goal weighting serves a number of purposes:

1. Showing priority of goals in our time management;
2. Showing the relative impact of goals;
3. Ensuring performance scores reflect goal importance and impact; and,
4. Aligning merit increases or bonus pay to results on higher priority tasks.

However, by simply examining data from competencies over many years, it's clear that a simple comparison of several rating scenarios of poor, average, and top performers often demonstrates that weighting does not have a major impact on the actual ratings, nor does it change day-to-day behavior. They may not accurately be reflecting the performance of the individual relative to the company's success or failure, and they may actually be demotivating to individuals who felt they did as they were instructed to do on a day-to-day basis, but still don't receive the expected bonus.

Rather, the tools that you use should make it easier to more accurately reflect the priorities on which you are asking your teams to focus. In that manner, management can have a more accurate view of what is actually happening.

Change Review Processes.

Originally created to provide consistency among ratings, protect organizations from disgruntled employees, and foster growth with employees, performance reviews in today's environment appear, ironically, to put companies at greater risk.

Companies are now recognizing that in situations where supervisors lack managerial courage, average performance ratings followed by termination, or lower than expected raises, can expose the company to increased external scrutiny, and even to litigation. At best, they waste managers' time.

Why not provide a tool that allows managers to enter performance information at any time, and then capture a full snapshot of employee information on an annual (or more frequent) basis? Even more powerful tools can foster change by monitoring the follow-up of managers who rate employees low. Additionally, performing analytics on employees with low ratings and the subsequent follow-up from their managers can identify needs for leadership development.

Change Pay for Performance.

Are you truly paying for performance, or are the managers reverse engineering scores to achieve the desired merit increases or bonuses?

Why not change the paradigm to stop using tools to justify a raise for people who simply achieve the expected levels of performance. A more practical approach is to offer a slightly lower "standard" increase for anyone meeting expectations, and then use the tools for managers to help make a business case for any additional increase by capturing accomplishments in real-time or taking on more goals or responsibilities. The impact of those increases in performance or responsibilities can then be tied to actual return-on-investment (ROI).

With tools monitoring the amount of money awarded by managers each month in relation to budget, it is entirely reasonable to have a goal that "less" would be allocated across the organization within a year. More importantly there would be less focus on the "merit increase event." Merit increases would be more equated to either achievement of goals, which had a demonstrable financial impact, or for acceptance of additional responsibilities.

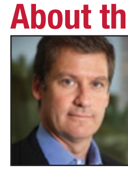
Conclusion

Considering the amount of change that is happening within our organizations, often supported by shrinking resources, organizations must continually look for ways to leverage technology to facilitate that change. And in a workforce culture that is more receptive to change than ever, you must reconsider all aspects of evaluation and development, and be willing to allow the tools to address needs on-demand.

Managers must be willing to accept that just because goals are set at an individual level does not mean that they are immutable. In smart organizations, goals change!

The sooner we all consider a competency library that is relevant, starts small, and continues to evolve, with a growing library of associated training that can be dynamically assigned, the sooner our business users will feel like they've been heard.

About the Author



Paul Meyer has been leading talent management software development teams as the president of Starfield Talent Management Solutions, acquired by Ascentis in 2014. Meyer brings more than 22 years of leading sales, marketing, and product management teams in both the technology and supply chain management industries and has been an advocate of more innovative approaches to technology's role in HR. Meyer holds a bachelor's degree in Mathematics and Computer Science from the State University of New York. He can be reached at ***paul.meyer@ascentis.com.***