

5 warning signs of performance-review problems

Job reviews shouldn't be paper-moving programs that return zero value. Here are five symptoms that warn of trouble in a supervisor's appraisal process, according to Joan Rennekamp, HR pro at the Denver law firm of Rothgerber, Johnson & Lyons:

1. Employees are unpleasantly surprised by the ratings. Performance appraisals shouldn't contain surprises. They should be a summary of comments employees have already heard throughout the evaluation period. Unpleasant surprises indicate that supervisors are not being candid or communicative with employees.
2. Ratings by one supervisor or department are uniformly excellent. Although it's inappropriate to apply a "bell curve" to employees' performance, it is also inappropriate to rate everyone at the same level.
3. Great employees don't receive great ratings. Look around at the employees who are the strongest. They should be receiving the best ratings. If not, your appraisals aren't rewarding those they should.
4. Employees who are dismissed have received recent excellent appraisals. One purpose of performance reviews is to provide documentation for the organization in case a dismissal is necessary. When the performance appraisal doesn't support a later decision, it can make it more difficult for the employer to defend its actions.
5. Productivity generally goes down during appraisal time. The purpose of performance reviews is to increase productivity. Any process that is not contributing to that goal should not be continued. If your system is not doing so, don't hesitate to rate it as "unsatisfactory" and design a new one.