

NEXT CULTURE WORK: Empowerment versus Judgment – A New Kind of Appraisal Interview!

A recurrent topic in companies, which causes tension between employees and bosses is the appraisal interview or performance review meeting. You might know these kinds of conversations. In most of the companies this conversation is set up in the way that the boss and the employee get together once or twice a year in order to review the performance and way of working of the employee. For this meeting there is usually there is a predefined form available, which shows specific criteria that are supposed to be evaluated, e. g.:

- Professional competence,
- Readiness for work / motivation,
- Internal and external social competence (including sub-categories such as ability to communicate and make contact, liability, behavior, negotiation skills, persuasive power, give-and-take, etc.),
- Leadership competencies (including sub-categories such as motivation, delegation, ability to judge, decisiveness, assertiveness, etc.),
- State of target achievement,
- Further criteria.

The appraisal is mainly based on the school grading system (depending on country, e. g. 1 to 6 with 1 meaning *very good* and 6 meaning *very bad*) or another grading concept like a range from double plus ++ (meaning *very good*) to double minus - - (meaning *very bad* or *insufficient*). And here the evil already starts. Being judged like this distresses many employees already long before the meeting even starts, because it feels for them like facing the headsman. In the appraisal interviews it is very common to fight „for your life“ by bargaining, negotiating and competing for points and grades, because for many employees part of their salary depends on the judgment, e. g. with the so called dynamic salary or the bonuses that are assigned.

Since the conversation usually only takes place between the boss and the employee, the question is to which degree subjectivity influences the judgment. If both are on the same wavelength, the tendency is that the judgment of the boss is rather positive or that he bends the rules. If the relation is instead rather tense, it might well happen that hierarchical pressure is used to balance accounts with the employee and evaluate the performance lower.

Of course many times the judgment can be considered as fair. Yet, there is one thing that remains: A person is being evaluated! If you take this word apart – e-VALU(E)-ate – it is about determining the value of a person. Measuring the value of a person against a scale that somebody invented is totally insane in itself, because each human being has originally the same human dignity and the same value. Just think about which scale is considered. The concept of judgment in good or bad, right or wrong comes from inquisition times, where it was about getting rid of assumed dangerous – because powerful – people in order to ensure the power of the church. The fear of being judged or of not being good enough is deep in our cells – even though it is unconscious most of the times. Since this concept is still practiced in schools today and keeps being burned into our cells, it is of no surprise that it is more than ever present in modern society and applied in daily life. Most of the people judge constantly. The evaluate the look of someone, what they say, whether somebody is good or bad in their eyes, whether

the food tastes good or bad, whether the performance of someone is good or bad, which religion somebody belongs to, which skin color they have or which country they come from. You know this judgment game!

However, by judging another person, we actually separate from them and are no longer in connection, because the value of that person is only based on what they do, while we disregard their being qualities. This is what mainly happens in the appraisal interview. They focus on what the employee DOES instead of considering their BEING qualities. The appreciation of the being is missing so that the employee oftentimes feels like not being seen. It doesn't come as a surprise that many employees are therefore stressed and only do their job trying to "look good", but shutting their innermost qualities away.

When you ask in HR departments of companies whether appreciation is part of their appraisal interviews or performance review meetings you will oftentimes get the answer: „Of course, employees are told when they did something nicely.“ However, this has unfortunately nothing to do with appreciation. In the best case it is praise. Many people are not aware that praise is a subtle form of manipulation. Why? Well, if a boss tells his employee „You did this great!“ what is the unconscious purpose? The unconscious purpose is to manipulate the employee to do his work just in the same way in the future as they did in the past. Since many employees are starving for recognition and want to belong to the category „good employee“, this kind of manipulation game works.

Praise is also very often confused with feedback. If you ask whether there is a feedback culture in the company, the answer we heard very often was: “Of course. In the annual appraisal meeting the employee always gets feedback whether he did something good or bad.”

It seems to be one big, unclear potpourri that often leads to the fact that employees dislike these kinds of meetings. Last but not least resentment often occurs, because the boss might not be really able to judge the performance of the employee, because they don't work close enough with them together. Instead they try to do an evaluation from the distance, which is rather questionable.

A big deficiency of the normal appraisal interviews is that the focus is on a dead judgment concept. The focus is not at all on empowering the employee, i. e. supporting them and allowing them to grow, unfold their potential and bring in their talents. So how could an alternative look like? How could appraisal interviews or performance review meetings be set up in a different way so that all participants are nourished and the specific employee is empowered to develop further?

We did this research experiment in a mid-sized company. An inquiry in the company revealed that the old appraisal interview that was based on school grades and the evaluation of certain criteria (as described at the beginning) didn't work anymore, a project announcement was made. Those employees who were interested and were willing to take responsibility for the creation of a new kind of appraisal interview or performance review meeting were asked to register for this project. A creative and motivated team of 7 employees got together and within 2 hours created an amazing new possibility. In order to start totally free from zero, the old judgment forms and concept documents were symbolically torn apart at the beginning of the meeting. The team was not bound at all to old parameters, but could start from nothingness. The question for the team was: “If you had a magic wand and could create a new meeting format for the former appraisal interview, what would it ideally be like? What would be the essential aspects?”

A new era of personnel talk

The new era of appraisal interview starts with a fundamental change of perspectives. While common appraisal interviews are usually focused on the past, a new kind of meeting would focus on the future and take place in service of the employee. It would not only be about supporting the employee, but about really empowering them, i. e. giving them possibilities so that they can keep unfolding their potential and leave the meeting starved.

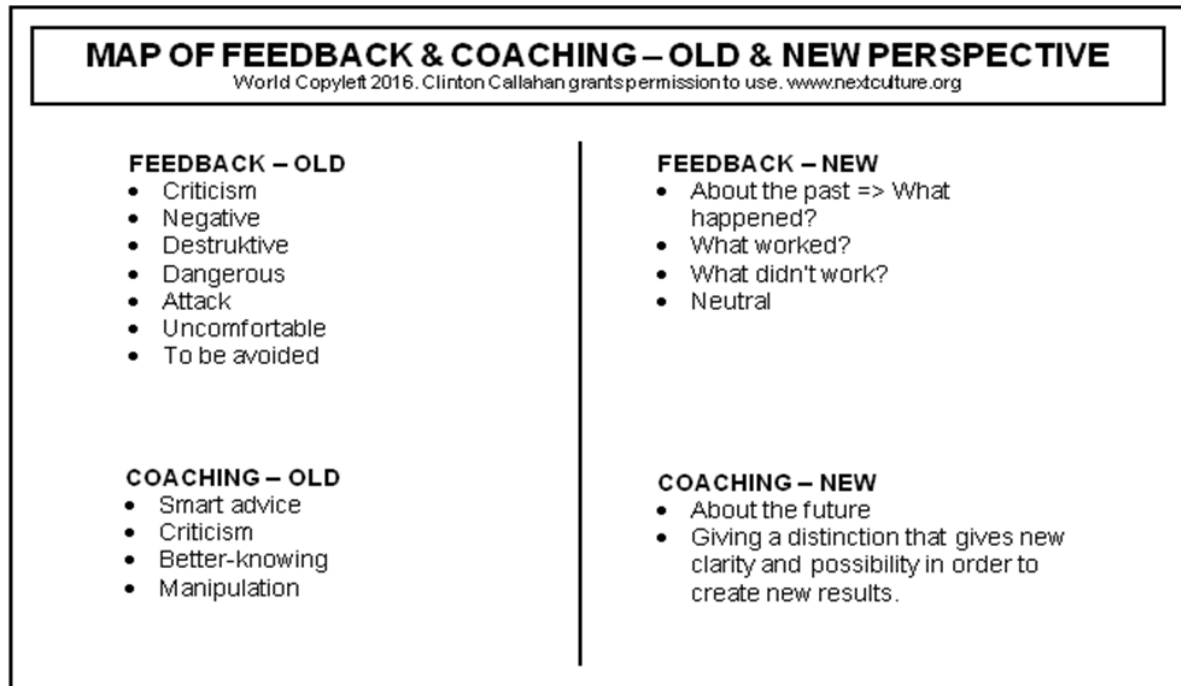
The team agreed that it was important to invite those colleagues as participant of such a meeting, who work really close together with the employee, because they have a detailed picture about them. The colleagues can be people from different departments and over all hierarchical levels, ideally 3 to 6 people. Since several people take part in the new meeting, it was called "Super Ball" (not to be confused with the American football event „Super Bowl“), referring to the fact that the ball of conversation is passed from one participant to another, each of them creating possibilities for the employee or giving them feedback and coaching.

The relevant 3 to 6 people are defined by the employee. However, to avoid that they leave out a colleague who could probably give "dangerous" feedback, the employee picks a so called *buddy* and *space holder*, who has been especially trained in that role. This person has several tasks:

- They check whether all relevant colleagues, who can give profound feedback, have been invited and adds missing colleagues
- They invite the colleagues to a 2,5 to 3 hour Super Ball Meeting and send around documents for preparation
- They prepare the meeting room so that there is only a circle of chairs (no table in the middle)
- When starting the meeting they clarify logistics and specific rules of the game as well as guidelines for feedback and coaching.
- They *hold space* during the meeting, i. e. they navigate the space into the direction of the employee having the biggest benefit and all participants being in service of the employees so that the employee can grow
- They ensure that one participant writes down the feedback for the employee so that the employee is not distracted by writing.
- They pay attention that all rules of the game are applied and that so called *low drama* is not happening (low drama is a persecutor-rescuer-victim game, which is about blaming, justifying, discussion and expectations).

During the conversation the job tasks the employee is responsible for are looked at. However, it is not about evaluating the performance with school degrees. It is rather about the individual qualities that are relevant for each task. The company has therefore established a system, in which each task in the company is connected to so called *Bright Principles*, which are considered in the Super Ball meeting. Here is an example: An employee is responsible for "documentation of research results and experiments". The bright principles that are necessary in this case are PRECISION, CLARITY, RELIABILITY, ATTENTIVENESS. In the Super Ball meeting the colleagues give then feedback on how the employee showed these qualities or what they can do differently in the future. Note that it is no longer about DOING. It is about the qualities the employee brings in. In order to give clear feedback about the qualities, all participants get a list from the buddy before the meeting starts, in which every single task of the employee and the corresponding bright principles are listed.

For such a kind of Super Ball conversation it is important that all participants have a new understanding about feedback and coaching (and have ideally trained it). It is no longer about good or bad, right or wrong. It is completely neutral about what worked and what didn't work. When giving coaching the colleagues give the employee distinctions so that they get new clarity and thus new possibilities in order to be able to unfold even more. If for example something didn't work in the past, the employee gets the distinction about what would happen if he tried it differently and what it would be like.



Another important aspect is that the employee does not only get feedback and coaching, but also conscious appreciation. In the Super Ball meeting there is a so called appreciation round so that every participant can say what they appreciate about the employee. In this case it is again neither about doing nor about having. It is about BEING, about how the employee is in their core being. The colleagues clearly describe the being qualities of the employee, e. g.: „I appreciate your clarity and lightness you bring into the projects.“ or „I appreciate your heartiness, with which you weave the team together.“ It is about seeing and recognizing the employee in their being.

Last but not least the buddy also checks during the Super Ball whether there is resentment against the employee. If this is the case, the resentment is dissolved in a special process so that a free flowing collaboration is possible again.

There are many more aspects that are part of this meeting, but this would go beyond the scope of this article. The foremost description should rather serve as inspiration for you to break down old structures and outdated personnel talks and appraisal interviews and try something new.

Is such a new kind of meeting frightening? Yes, it is indeed. Just the fact that the employee is no longer facing his boss alone, but instead 3 to 6 colleagues is scary. However, the astonishing thing is that all participants of Super Ball meetings have confirmed that these meetings are greatly enriching and powerful.



Super Ball is enriching for the employee, because they:

- get collaborative feedback and coaching (which is not necessarily „nice“ but instead clear and precise so that they can keep developing),
- make the experience of the colleagues supporting them and being there for them (“all for one”),
- are appreciated in their being and are thus truly seen,
- can solve conflicts, problems or resentment.

For the participating colleagues it is enriching, because they:

- commit to the employee and thus have a connection to them,
- support them to get to the next level,
- experience creative collaboration in a team,
- Win by the employee winning (this is called *Winning Happening*. It is very enriching to be in service of a person and give them possibilities so that they can grow),
- Can clear resentment, which might exist between them and the employee so that a new fruitful connection and collaboration becomes possible,
- Learn new things about the employee and the colleagues.

This is certainly not the only way of leading appraisal interviews or performance review meetings in a different way. The question is: Are you ready to try something new? Are you ready to focus again on the human being instead of only on profit and company targets? Old procedures are certainly comfortable, because we simply know how they work and what the meeting will be like. However, the old procedure is neither alive nor does it really serve the employee (except from the monetary level, if they reach their targets). Are you ready for a new aliveness and inspiration? Are you ready for a more human business world?

In the following you find again a table comparing the different criteria of the former appraisal interview and a possible new team Super Ball meeting.

OLD MAP: Appraisal Interview	NEW MAP: Team Super Ball
Takes place one on one between boss and employee	Takes place in a team of 3 to 6 people
The boss might not be able to judge the performance	Team is composed of colleagues who work closely together with the employee
E-VALU(E)-ation is based on school grading system or another grading concept	Empowerment of employee so that they can unfold their full potential
Predefined evaluation form	No evaluation form at all. Instead the focus is on bright principles of the different tasks
Purpose: Manipulate the employee to work even harder for the company targets	Purpose: give the employee clear distinctions so that they get new clarity and possibility to go further

OLD MAP: Appraisal Interview	NEW MAP: Team Super Ball
Low drama in the form of discussions, arguments, bargaining, justifications, etc.	<i>Winning Happening</i> through collaborative cooperation
Focus is only on the DOING of the employee and on the company targets	Focus is on the BEING qualities of the employee
Hierarchical	All work as a team – no hierarchy
Boring	Alive, inspiring, nourishing
Does not land, because the performance is only discussed on the intellectual level	Lands in the body of the employee, due to the special kind of feedback, coaching and appreciation. Is sustainable
Unclear potpourri due to confusion of praise (manipulation) with appreciation and feedback	Clarity and intensity due to clear distinctions and use of feedback, coaching and appreciation
Arbitrary. Can be applied to everybody	Individual, tailor-made
Employee doesn't feel seen	Employee is truly seen
Oriented towards the company profit	Oriented towards the human being. Development and unfolding are important

Have fun experimenting!

(Author: Nicola Nagel)

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