

Why do managers distort Performance Appraisal?

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A Justice perspective

ABSTRACT

This paper builds on the work of Spence and Keeping (2011), which recommended studying conscious rating distortion within motivational frameworks. I applied organizational justice theory to explain this phenomenon. This paper also discusses the view that fairness should be promoted over accuracy in performance appraisal. The paper suggests that conscious rating distortion is a constructive deviance.

Keywords: *perceived justice, conscious rating distortion, performance appraisal, constructive deviance behavior.*

Conscious Rating Distortion in Performance Appraisal:**The Role of Organizational Justice**

Although performance appraisals are generally disliked by both employees and managers (Law, 2007), they are unlikely to be eliminated. A survey conducted by Lawler, Benson, and McDermott (2012) of a hundred large U.S. corporations found only six considering a partial or a complete elimination of performance appraisals. This finding is not surprising. Performance appraisal is considered one of the most important functions in human resource management (Boswell & Boudreau, 2002). It has also been an instrument in other human resource management practices, including compensation, decision-making, communication, training, and development.

This reliance has encouraged research on performance appraisal which has focused on evaluating rating instruments, especially the measurement error that may distort performance appraisals. This research suggested that training will minimize raters' biases, with an underlying assumption that the distortion is happening unwillingly (Benedict & Levine, 1988; Woehr & Huffcutt, 1994).

A novel study of performance appraisal brought attention to more intentional ratings distortion. Thurston and McNall (2010) showed that politics can inspire such distortion. Spence and Keeping (2011) proposed that managers are rating not for accuracy but for motivation.

This paper intends to provide a more complete perspective on this intentional distortion and its motives. First, it will present relevant findings from the literature. Second, it will explain these reasons using organizational justice theory as a framework. In conclusion, it will discuss the value of performance appraisal fairness over accuracy.

1. Conscious Rating Distortion in Performance Appraisal

Rating error has been researched extensively. Most early research focused on the reliability of the appraisal measures, and attributed possible error to measurement error in the rating tool. However, a recent shift in research scope has changed the research focus to the view that rating inaccuracy has more to do with rater distortion of performance appraisals. The rater was seen as a source of rating inaccuracy as early as 1986, when a survey conducted by Bernardin and Villanova showed that most raters, ratees, and performance appraisal systems administrators blamed the rater for rating inaccuracy. However, the error in this case was seen, at first, as resulting from the rater's cognitive limitation (Murphy, Blazer, 1986), and lack of training (Latham, Wexley, & Pursell, 1975; Landy, Vance, Barnes-Farrell, & Steele, 1980; Hulin, 1982). Later research incorporated the view that raters may intentionally make these errors to achieve organizational goals (Wong & Kwong, 2007).

This theory is not well-researched, but it has been explained and tested in a political context. Results suggested that performance appraisals resulted from manager's desires for desirable outcomes for their units, to portray themselves as caring individuals by reflecting a favorable self-image, and to avoid negative consequences and conflicts with employees. Tziner, Latham, Price, and Haccoun (1996) provided empirical data supporting the idea that raters manipulated performance appraisals to obtain benefits for employees and to maintain healthy interpersonal relationships with the ratees. Villanova, Bernardin, Dahmus, and Sims (1993) provided evidence that rater leniency resulted from rater discomfort with the performance appraisal process. Empirical studies have also shown the rater's personality and attitude about the organization and the performance appraisal system affect the rating behavior; the ability to assign high or low ratings can be highly predicted on the basis of these measures (Tziner, Murphy, & Cleveland, 2005).while Employees' behaviors affect managers' opinions about them and affect

performance appraisal accuracy as well (Cleveland and Murphy, 1992; Goodwin, Wofford, & Boyd, 2000).

Another source of inaccuracy is the rater's lack motivation. Harris (1994) proposed that managers may lack the motivation to perform an accurate rating because they are usually not rewarded for doing performance appraisals since organizations usually do not evaluate managers' work on this task, making it difficult to identify which managers are doing acceptable jobs with performance management tasks; many organizations apparently do not appreciate the rating activity highly.

Another factor that impacted the level of performance appraisal acridity was studied by Murphy and Cleveland (1995), who proposed the distal and proximal level between the rater and the ratees influenced rater behavior, which eventually affected performance appraisals. Murphy and Cleveland (1995) made a strong distinction between distal and proximal influences on rater behavior. The former affects the whole company atmosphere, affecting ratings secondarily. The performance appraisal itself and consequences which result directly from assigning higher or lower ratings represent proximal influences.

2. Organizational Justice as a Motivation Theory

Driven from other motivation theories like equity theory, and expectancy theory, a significant growing volume of research of different concepts of fairness in the workplace has developed. This work was without a theoretical framework until Greenburg (1984) developed a taxonomy of organizational justice theories and then reviewed their development in the theory building (Greenburg, 1990). Since then, many research works have referred to organizational justice as a theory (Skarlicki & Latham, 1996; Husted & Folger, 2004; Shapiro, 2001).

Korman, Greenhaus, and Badin (1977) were the first to link perceived fairness to motivation as they studied motivation to set of personnel attitudes in workplace in particular job

satisfaction (Latha & Pinder, 2005; Greenberg, 1987). Organizational justice has also been studied in the context of motivation since perceived injustice was found to be related to a wide range of employee attitudes and behavior (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; Colquitt & Rodell, 2011; Greenberg, 1987). Justice (or injustice) was used to explain attitudes and behaviors such as organizational commitment (Folger & Konovsky, 1989), job satisfaction (Landy, Barnes, & Murphy, 1978), and leader-member exchange (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001), job performance (Adams, 1965; Lind, Kanfer, & Earley, 1990), employee withdrawal (Volpone, Avery, 2013), employee silences (Whiteside, Barclay, 2013), retaliation in the workplace (Skarlicki & Folger 1997), and counterproductive behavior (Conlon, Meyer, Nowakowski, 2005).

These studies used organizational justice as an explanation to set of behaviors and attitude. By doing so, organizational justice theory was applied as a motivational theory.

3. Organizational Justice and Conscious Rating Distortion in Performance Appraisal

Viewing the conscious rating distortion literature from the perspective of Organizational Justice helps clarify the motives underlying rater behavior as striving to achieve a higher degree of organizational justice or a lower degree of organizational injustice. The following few sections will include a discussion of the conscious rating distortion literature within the three organizational justice subcomponents: procedural justice, distributive justice, and interpersonal justice.

3.1 Procedural Justice and Conscious Rating Distortion

Procedural justice refers to the mechanical aspects of achieving fairness in the organization (Kernan, Hanges, 2002; Leventhal, 1976). Fairness is judged by whether resource

allocations match the appropriate norms (Leventhal, 1976). Greenberg (1990) summarized procedural justice in one phrase: the system of satisfaction.

In the context of performance appraisal, a survey found only 5% of human resources specialists were very satisfied with the appraisal systems they used, and that most do not consider the appraisal process fair (Markle, 2000). An empirical study supports that performance appraisal outcomes depend heavily on the attitudes of participants toward the system. Tziner, Murphy, Cleveland, Beaudin, and Marchand (1998) empirically found that rater opinions about performance appraisal and its organizational context affect the appraisal quality. Distortion may occur when a manager feels the need to protect a good performer whose performance has suffered because of personal issues (Longenecker, 1987). The manager would believe in this case that the system does not protect the employee.

Therefore, raters do seem to intentionally distort performance appraisals when they do not trust the accuracy of the rating system in order to achieve higher procedural justice. This argument is supported by the political model, which argues that the inaccuracy in performance appraisals is due to the bias that performance appraisals are unfair (Tziner, Murphy, & Cleveland, 2005).

Even though previous work suggested that conscious rating distortion may result from the raters' disbelief in the accuracy of the rating system, this paper is the first to attribute this behavior to the raters' aspiration to reduce procedural injustice.

3.2 Distributive Justice and Conscious Rating Distortion

Distributive justice refers to individual perceptions of fairness based on comparison of outcomes to contributions. Fairness is judged by whether one ratio of outcomes to inputs matches

others. Folger (1994) defined distributive justice as an evaluation of the outcome considering the amount of the input. Greenberg (1990) summarized distributive justice as outcome satisfaction.

Managers may distort performance appraisals when they feel their rating will otherwise produce distributive injustice. Research shows changes in raters' behaviors when they believe that evaluations determine administrative rewards, such as promotion or salary increases, and not only feedback and development needs (Longenecker, Sims, Gioia, 1987) When performance appraisal results are linked to salary, managers hesitate to rate negatively due to the harsh consequences (Curtis, Harvey, Ravden, 2005) Ashauer (2010) showed empirically that upward rating distortion lessened when raters believed beneficial outcomes for the employee would result. Managers may also be motivated to distort performance appraisal to achieve valuable outcomes for their units, thereby seeking distributive justice for all (Cleveland & Murphy, 1992). Previous research has not linked this concept to rating distortion, but this argument does.

3.3 Interpersonal Justice and Conscious Rating Distortion

Interpersonal justice refers to a level of concern and respect directed toward individuals when decision-makers implement procedures or take actions that affect the distributive outcome for individuals (Greenberg, 1990). This concept emphasizes treating people with respect and dignity, as they perceive unfairness whenever they are not treated well.

Performance appraisal is a sensitive task for managers and employees, who both dislike it. Managers would rather avoid the role of appraiser, since employees often argue with the accuracy of their assessments (Rondeau, 1992). This sensitivity makes the act of performance appraisal uncomfortable. Ashauer (2010) showed empirically that when harmful appraisal outcomes were expected, ratings were higher when made face-to-face than anonymously.

According to Tziner, Latham, Price, and Haccoun (1996), managers may manipulate appraisals in order to maintain quality relationships between the supervisor and employees. They

also show that supervisors are likely to give overstated performance ratings in order to avoid uncomfortable feedback sessions with their employees. That managers avoid confrontations with employees and avoid delivering bad news to employees to preserve healthy relationships reflect a higher degree of interpersonal justice, which emphasizes showing concern about employees and whoever representing authority in the organization treating employees with dignity, respect, and politeness.

Even though the performance distortions literature has proposed and tested the view that raters distort performance appraisals in order to maintain good interpersonal relationships with their ratees, the literature does not discuss interpersonal justice as a motivation for this distortion behavior.

4: Accurate Versus Fair Performance Appraisals

An important purpose of performance appraisals is to help improve employees' performance through providing feedback about their work during the specified rating period. However, a performance appraisal that was perceived as a source of injustice will have an adverse effect on the employee's motivation. A study by Sholihin and Pike (2009) showed a strong, positive correlation between the perceived justice of a performance appraisal and both job satisfaction and supervisor trust.

The purpose of improving employee performance will not be accomplished when performance appraisals are seen as unfair, since perceived injustice was found to diminish, rather than improve, employees' motivations, which make unfair performance appraisals damaging (Heslin & Vandewalle, 2011).

The argument that accurate performance appraisals are important because of their role as a decision-making instrument in other human resources management practices (such as compensation, rewards systems, staffing, training, and development) is undermined by the fact

that employees who perceived unfairness in their performance appraisals usually argue their appraisals' accuracy (Rondeau, 1992). Employees who question the accuracy of their appraisal will end up questioning every single decision that is taken based on this appraisal. The experience of preserved injustice, in this case, will not be limited to the unfair appraisal but will expand to include every single outcome that was based on the appraisal.

Empirical data debunk the popular belief that accurate performance appraisals are the ultimate goal (Villanova & Bernardin, 1989; Hauenstein, 1992; Villanova et al., 1993) and have shown that managers' main concern is not accuracy when rating their subordinates' performance. Rather, their primary concern is how performance appraisals can be used to motivate their subordinates (Spence & Keeping, 2011). Researchers have devoted a great deal of unnecessary attention and effort to determine the ideal rating tool for producing an accurate appraisal when accuracy is simply not the main goal to seek. Based on the reviewed literature, even with the most perfect appraising tool that would create accurate appraisals, their accuracy will still be affected by human cognitive and emotional factors, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Appraisals may not be accurate, but they are certainly not illusory (Tziner, Murphy, & Cleveland, 2005). A great deal of information is gathered from performance appraisals about what the individual's skills are and how well they perform their jobs. Employees' future performance and these data are extremely important to any organization.

5: Conscious Distortion of Performance Appraisals and Constructive Deviance

Constructive deviance is defined as "intentional behaviors that depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways" (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003, p. 209). Galperin (2003) defines it as "a voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in doing so contributes to the well-being of an organization, its members, or both" (p. 158). Based on these definitions, the view that managers promote perceived justice among employees over the

accuracy of performance appraisals within organizations and that they internationally distort performance appraisals to decrease the degree of perceived organizational injustice are examples of constructive deviance behaviors.

This thought holds true for cases in which managers' intentions to distort appraisals are limited to seeking an optimal balance between the interests of the organization and the people within that organization. Ethical and legal standards, as well as the effect of this behavior on the other groups in the same organization, should all be taken into account when evaluating these intentional distortions of performance appraisals as constructive deviance behaviors, even when they were intended to avoid the negative consequences of the appraisals on the employee and his or her relationships with and within the organization.

6. Suggestions for Future Research

Even though conscious rating distortion has recently yielded a fair amount of attention, there is still a lack of established theories in the rating distorting literature. A majority of the research has attempted to explain the source of the conscious rating distortion without seeking explanations that use the raters' motivations to make such distortions. This paper, on the other hand, is built on Spence and Keeping (2011)'s suggestion that conscious rating distortion should be studied within a motivation framework. More work is needed in this direction, as the phenomena of conscious rating distortion may be explained using other motivation theories.

There is also a paucity of empirical studies in the field of conscious rating distortion, and most of the empirical studies that tested this topic discussed this behavior in other organizational and non-organizational contexts. I suggest conducting empirical studies within the framework of organizational justice as the motivational theory because organizational justice theory provides a logical explanation to this phenomenon that was reasonably tightened to support the previous research findings. In addition, future research should involve the ethical implications of

conscious rating distortion and whether managers face an existing ethical dilemma that causes them to distort appraisals or prevents them from doing so.

The view that performance appraisal conscious distortion is a form of constructive deviance behaviors is briefly discussed in this paper. Further investigations for this view will yield a more complete perspective regarding this interpretation. The presented implication of this paper that managers rate to motivate and not achieve accuracy should be tested in the context of other human resources management functions that used performance appraisals as a decision making instrument and whether this implication would affect the value of the decisions being made.

7. Conclusion

This paper provides new descriptions to the study of performance measurement. For that purpose, this paper introduces explanations of a kind of behavior that managers may exhibit when appraising employee performance, specifically the raters' motivations when rating employee performance.

This paper contributes to the management field in different ways. First, it provides a clearer view regarding appraisal distortion. Second, this paper defines organizational justice as a motivational theory, thus adding to the great number of studies that use organizational justice to explain a wide range of employee attitudes and behaviors. Third, this paper establishes the view that managers aim to maintain a lower level of perceived organizational justice in rating performance when appraising their subordinates' performance. Finally, this paper introduces the idea that the conscious distortion of performance appraisals could be a constructive deviance behaviour.

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