

On Zeng Shiqiang's Essentials of Effective Staff Performance Appraisals

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Abstract. This paper mainly talks about the staff performance appraisal in Chinese style management held by Professor Zeng Shiqiang. The performance appraisal is a useful tool to help employees make self-criticism in order to do a more satisfactory job in the future, and his work of appraising staff's performance is to be premised on the basis of "getting problems solved and achieving the best possible result." The manager first of all must set up reasonable criteria for assessment, and "reasonable" does not absolutely mean right, but refers how to get problems solved so as to arrive at a perfect state in management. To fulfill this purpose, several concrete and tangible suggestions raised by Prof. Zeng are made a detailed discussion and analysis in this paper.

Introduction

This paper mainly talks about the staff performance appraisal in Chinese style management held by Professor Zeng Shiqiang, a well-known scholar and the founder of the Chinese management.

The performance appraisal is a useful tool to help employees make self-criticism in order to do a more satisfactory job in the future. Prof. Zeng argues that the work of appraising staff's performance is to be premised on the basis of "getting problems solved and achieving the best possible result." [1][2] To get this purpose, Prof. Zeng believes that the manager first of all must set up reasonable criteria for assessment and right does not absolutely mean feasible. [1][3] This paper also discusses Prof. Zeng's suggestions about how to take a reasonable attitude to deal with staff's mistakes in the staff performance appraisals and hold the positive mindset for the performance appraisal whose purpose is to help the employees make improvements rather than give them a hard time, or to "save", rather than "kill" people, to kick them out.

Setting up Reasonable Criteria of Assessment: Right does not Mean Feasible

Western management favors making judgments between right and wrong in a dichotomous way. Hence, they tend to accept a relatively simple standard: judge the staff as either "good" or "bad", and judge things as either "right" or "wrong".

In fact, as far as the management principle is concerned, Prof. Zeng thinks that there is no basic difference between western management and Chinese management, but when it comes to the staff evaluation, Chinese managers take a completely different approach from their western counterparts. Many of the Chinese, as they grow up, have been repeatedly told that "you are right, but that does not help". If these words are put in the context of management, they seem to be incredibly important and cannot be neglected."

"But, pity, no use at all. Just remember: doing things right does not necessarily help solve problems."

"Doing things right does not necessarily help to solve problems"----these words have been ringing in the ears of most Chinese people since their childhood. Hearing the words, one may recall that when he was a child, he reacted violently only under the provocation of his brother, but both of them were punished by their parents who thought that "it takes two to make a quarrel"[4]. He was then told to stand in the corner of the room to reflect on his mistake. As he was standing, he came to understand why he was punished as well even though he was right----simply because "doing things right does not necessarily help to solve problems". It is obvious that the parents' punishment of both of them helps

him learn a good lesson. Unfortunately, Prof. Zeng thinks that some of Chinese educators nowadays seem to be intentionally ignoring it, claiming that it is unfair.[5] They criticize it for causing disharmony among siblings and confusion of children in distinguishing the right from the wrong. To me, that is a preposterous accusation, demonstrating their ignorance.

Zeng makes a further explanation that although Chinese people cannot tolerate mistakes, they do not think only sticking to the right side can sometimes help solve actual problems. It is apparent that Chinese people favor the tripartite division way of thinking, which enables them to seek a third solution that has the merits of the both two (“right” and “wrong”) by combining them together. It is known that the only goal of the appraisal work is to get problems solved, which also contributes a lot to arriving at a perfect state in management

What is the third solution? Zeng illustrates it as follows. Supposing a salesperson deals with the customer strictly according to the rules and regulations of the company, making the customer unhappy, and the customer leaves the shop without buying anything, the salesperson may think that he’s right in carrying out the company’s rules and regulations to the letter, however, the general manager doesn’t think so and criticizes him severely, because the general goal of urging customers to fulfill the purchase action is not achieved, and the problem of how to succeed in persuading people to do shopping has not been solved. Therefore, although the salesperson has done the right thing, by adhering to the rules and regulations of the company, but “doing the things right does not necessarily help to solve the problem”.

Only by now have most of people come to understand why Chinese people like neither the people who blur the line between right and wrong, nor those who are so sensitive as to draw a dividing line in between. The former is usually done by a muddled-headed fellow, likely to “spoil the broth”, while the latter may appear to be aggressive and often hurt others’ face and feelings. How to protect people’s face has constituted a very important variable to evaluate whether the perfect state of management is reached or not.

It is not easy to do things right, and more difficult to solve problems in a satisfactory way. There are many people who put forward very high goals for them to achieve, but can only end up with reaching the up-middle level, slightly above the average. With regard to this matter, Prof. Zeng advises that the manager should help the employees realize that success always goes to those who devote themselves to doing their jobs, and the dedicated attitude always matters more than only working hard.[1] [2] From this perspective, what the manager needs to do is to provide a relaxing and agreeable environment by taking protecting employees’ face at the first place, for the employees to build up not only devoted and loyal attitude but also a more flexible and suitable manner to deal with the work to yield more satisfactory results, which is none other than the social purpose of appraising staff’s performance: getting problems solved and achieving the best possible results.

Taking the Most Reasonable Way to Deal with Staff’s Mistakes

Prof. Zeng claims that what the Chinese hate most is the failure to distinguish right from wrong, and they always try to hold an indiscriminate attitude when making judgments. And Chinese people also dislike expressing themselves hastily, but they like to give the matter their careful consideration to find the best way to express it. As mentioned above, Chinese people prefer to walk out of the dichotomous thinking based upon “right or wrong”, and “yes or no”, and agree on the tripartite division of thinking by finding out a more suitable and feasible way to deal with the problems.

Prof. thinks that there are three major steps to practice management: to plan, to execute and to review and making performance appraisal, which repeat themselves endlessly and seem to be similar both in the eastern and western contexts. However, there still exists a big difference in that the westerners, when reviewing and evaluating work performance, prefer to take a straightforward attitude, and point out other people’s mistakes without any reserve, which is perceived by many Chinese as inconsiderate and improper, because criticizing people this way would hurt other people’s face. So the Chinese tend to avoid this thin-disguised manner. In order to avoid making a pointless general review about the staff’s performance, a question appears: what are the best ways to treat the

employee's mistakes in Chinese staff performance appraisals context? Prof. Zeng puts forward a few tips for this question, which are supposed to provide an opportunity for a manager to shine as a qualified leader and earn respect and loyalty from his employees.

First, place the blame on corporate policies and regulations at the performance evaluation meeting, instead of straightforwardly reprimanding the concerned employees in order to save their face. Unlike the westerners who are prone to publicly admit mistakes, Chinese people are "stereo-typically" unwilling to acknowledge them openly. Given that saving face is a cultural norm in China, those who hold higher positions are more unwilling and reluctant to publicly apologize for the mistakes they have made lest they, including the cadres following them, would lose face and respect from the employees. Under such circumstances, the manager who has made mistakes is supposed to take a more secure strategy: "sacrifice the knights in order to save the queen". As a dominant figure or the "queen" in the company, the manager must maintain a good image, so he has to take some compromise tactics, such as by letting other leaders take the blame for him in order to ease dilemma. Or he may keep his faults confidential to the outside and secretive inside, so as to avoid expanding the bad effect. Prof. Zeng criticizes this kind of condition, thinking that both of the methods do not appear very satisfying. Instead, he believes that the best way is to cleverly throw all the blame on the system, pretending that nobody is wrong, only the system is not perfect, and if the system does not change, the same mistakes will still occur in the future. Thus, both the manager and the other staff will be very happy because their face has been saved.

On the other hand, Zeng explains that if the ordinary staff members make mistakes and get scolded in public, then they would most probably think, "I'd better do as little work as possible in the future, because the more work I do, the more mistakes I would commit. I have worked hard and have contributed a lot for the company, yet even an occasional mistake cannot be forgiven, so I ought to be cautious so as not to become the coming target of the accusation." In a word, if the manager tolerates no mistakes on the employee's part, he would put them on risk-averse mood, which would do a lot of harm to the harmony of the enterprise. Hence, there is an old saying for us to share: "crystal clear water feeds no fish" [6], which well pictures such a situation.

To Prof. Zeng, placing the blame on institutional system can serve as a kind of encouragement mechanism both to the manager and the staff, assuring them to be relaxed as long as they have devoted themselves to their work. On the other hand, supposing a person who should assume responsibility for the mistakes is not criticized openly, he is in fact more keenly aware of his own faults, and is grateful to the leader for helping him cover up the mistakes and save his face by being determined to work harder in the future.

Second, have a private face-to-face talk with the corresponding person, and encourage him to make a clear description and explanation about the mistakes he has made. A successful manager, though throwing the blame on system deficiency in public, should keep in mind that it is necessary to have an individual talk with the employee in order to find out the real cause of his wrongdoing. On the employee's part, he knows it quite well and understands the stakes: the manager is trying to save my face. If I stubbornly refuse to admit the mistakes, the manager might be displeased and feel that it doesn't pay to "save" me. Thus, it is better for the employee to confess the faults and ask for forgiveness.

To the employee, unless his faults will lead to irrecoverable consequences, it is never wise to ignore the goodwill of the manager and button up their lips. He probably will choose to tell part of what has happened at first in order to sound out the manager on this matter, and then tell the whole if the manager seems to be tolerant and forgiving enough.

Also, the attitude of the manager decides whether the employee will sincerely confess to the whole thing or not. Thus, it is advisable for the manager to embrace the employee's mistakes with a tolerant and open attitude. Encourage him to tell what has happened. Do not cut in or aggressively question him before he finishes the talk. What's more, never get the other relevant personnel for confrontation with him openly. Otherwise, no one would like to tell the truth for fear of becoming the target of future reprimand or reprisals.

Third, give the employee a second chance to make up for his mistakes. Certain punishment is necessary if the mistakes have resulted in irrecoverable consequences and caused great loss to the company. If not, help the employee deal with the mistakes in a way to make up for it rather than only focus on how to punish the person. Also, don't get the employee into thinking that he could easily walk away without punishment if admitting the mistakes, making him develop a thinking: "do not be afraid of making faults, nevertheless I will be okay", which is not good. The ultimate purpose of performance review, rather, is to help the employee realize his mistakes, get lessons, seek possible solutions to compensate for the loss caused, trying not to make them again.

Both the westerners and Chinese unanimously agree that mistakes should be addressed and corrected. However, based on the face-saving norm, the Chinese prefer to do it privately rather than openly, and then seek possible solutions with whole effort. Through the means of realizing the mistakes they can learn how to prevent repeating the same mistakes once again. After all, we are human beings, and nobody can be perfect all the time. What matters much more is to minimize the loss, mitigate the unfavorable consequences and prevent future troubles.

Throwing the blame on company policies instead of reprimanding the employees to his face is a reasonable way to prevent arousing angry emotions from the corresponding person, while at the same time all the people, especially the one who makes the mistakes, knows in their heart who should be responsible for it. Naturally, understanding the manager's goodwill to save his face, this person would feel urged to have an individual talk with the manager, and sincerely acknowledge his mistakes.

Taking Attitude to "save" Rather than to "kill"

One of the most important purposes of the staff performance appraisal is to "save" rather than to "kill". The manager should have the positive mindset that performance appraisal is conducted to help the employees make improvements rather than give them a hard time.

When making a plan, the Chinese always follow the teachings of Confucianism and set high standards and strict requirements for it. When executing the plan, they are always enlightened by the spirit of Taoism and take hardships as they come, since difficulties are inevitable to arise in the actual situation. When appraising staff performance, they have in mind the merciful attitude advocated by Buddhism, and advocate to "save" the employees with underperformance, thinking that it does not help to "kill" them now that the loss has been caused[7].

Prof. Zeng claims that as for the system of Chinese style management, when making staff performance evaluation, the manager should take a positive attitude and look upon the staff performance appraisal as a process to "save" rather than to "kill". It is known that most of us are much influenced by the Chinese traditional wisdom that "Heaven has the virtue of cherishing life", and therefore we mustn't do the "killing", which goes against the heaven. "Killing" in corporate management means to remove the "bad" employees from his position or even worse, to fire them. However, if not handled properly, it can set off a chain of negative reactions in the company and can increase the burden in the society. Hence, dismissal method should always be the last resort to turn to when you have no other options.

Many people are beginning to wonder and complain: now that you can neither discharge those with underperformance nor warn them by demerit or demotion, what's the use of the staff performance appraisal? Is the staff evaluation simply used to go through the motions only? Prof. Zeng argues that the grumbles fully prove that these people fail to understand the true meaning of the staff performance appraisal. They favor the idea of "killing" in staff evaluation, thinking that we should crack down hard on the bad hires and weed them out unhesitatingly. In fact they have taken a kind of wrong attitude in dealing with employees for their underperformance, and certainly will fail to gain support from the great majority of the company.

Prof. Zeng believes that the staff performance appraisal is a kind of incentive system whose purpose is to encourage employees to develop their strength, and assist the employees to realize their

shortcomings as well in order to correct them. It is a positive, beneficial and people-oriented way of thinking. Here are some tips on how to make the staff performance appraisal successful.

First, the staff performance appraisal should be based on the clear goals and objectives made in advance, without which it would run the risk of evaluating the staff arbitrarily and unreliably, just as the judge in the court takes discretionary evidence in trying a case. One thing that has to be paid attention to is that the manager should help the employees establish reasonable goals by themselves rather than decide goals for them.

In the year-end assessment, it is considered to be the first step to ask the employees to set clear goals and expectations for the year by themselves and provide whatever assistance needed in the process of “saving” people. The manager has to make it clear to the employees that if they want to continue working in the company they have to fulfill the tasks and make the achievements measured against the goals and objectives set arranged by themselves previously. “To live” or “to die” completely depends on themselves.

Generally speaking, a man usually tries to complete the tasks assigned by others, but he will make all-out efforts to achieve the objectives set by himself. Letting the employees decide their personal goal will motivate them to work hard and get the best out of them. It also can help them to get rid of possible confusion and hesitation. There are some employees who do not feel surefooted and tend to think that they are subjected to the manipulation of others, the reason maybe lies in the fact that their work objectives are set by the superior or someone else without their approval.

The second step to “saving” people is to provide employees with specific and measurable evaluation criteria as the base for them to assess their own job performance and make timely improvements to guarantee the desired outcome, by comparison with the evaluation criteria accepted by the employees themselves. It is true that quantifying all the criteria in detail is practically difficult, yet fair and just evaluation criteria are indeed a necessity, because apart from the advantages mentioned above, they can also ensure identifying industrious employees, thus helping to facilitate plan implementation and reducing complaints from the employees.

Remind the staff of their mistakes and deficiency in their work timely in order for the employees to put them right as early as possible. This is the third step of “saving staff”. A manager has to bear in mind that as a leader of the company he shoulders the responsibility of supervising and directing every subordinate’s work to ensure that they can complete the tasks smoothly and successfully. If a manager takes an indifferent attitude to his work, neither bothering asking his subordinates about their problems in the work, nor listening to their work report, and puts all the blame to the subordinates in order to whitewash himself as possible as he can, then what’s the use of such an irresponsible manager?

For Prof. Zeng, two things have to be emphasized. One is that feedback must be given timely, otherwise it would be too late, and the manager’s kind remonstrance could only turn into a kind of pure accusation to the subordinates or employees, and to no avail. In addition, the manager must provide whatever assistance needed to ensure that the subordinates are able to repair their mistakes.

In short, making staff performance evaluation can be such a challenge to every manager, yet it is not a wise choice to lose your temper, yell, scream, embarrass or punish the subordinates or employees when their performance falls short of their expectations. To ensure subordinates to successfully complete the task previously set by the company and accepted by himself, a better approach for the manager is to stand in the subordinate’s position whenever and wherever possible to think. Should something wrong arise, it would be better for the manager to be tolerant and open by taking it as a development opportunity and a lesson for the subordinates and employees to make improvement quickly and productively.

On the contrary, if the manager leaves the matter all up to the subordinates or employees, and steps back to watch and wait, he is indeed alienating them from himself or even worse, setting them against him. Indeed, it is never wise for the manager to sit on the sideline and watch the subordinates or employees struggling in the performance appraisal without giving them a helping hand, because this would not only damp down their enthusiasm, but the manager himself would be considered

“stone-hearted”, consequently turning the assessment into a mere formality without achieving any of the expected results.

Just like parents take pride in the achievement of their children, the manager will surely feel the same if his subordinates make remarkable achievements. Therefore, the primary task of the manager is to timely point out their shortcomings and deficiencies in their work, so that they are clear where they should make further improvement and modification. What’s more, the manager ought to give them possible support and assistance to guarantee the desirable work performance. In short, “saving” the subordinates proves to be beneficial both for the manager and for his subordinates.

Prof. Zeng thinks that those who favor the idea of “killing” in managerial practice, should always know that the “killer” is always to “be killed” in the end. [8] However, for those who are in favor of “saving”, they should also know that it is beyond one manager’s power to “save” all. A practically feasible solution, rather, is to save people with sincere heart, or the heart of Buddha, and never take credit to himself, nor ask anything in return. Buddhism believes that in order to relieve all kinds of pains like death and illness, one should treat others as we expect to be treated and bring comfort to others. Such is considered to be the real benevolence and mercifulness preached by the philosophy of Buddhism.

Conclusion

This paper discusses and analyzes Prof. Zeng Shiqiang’s viewpoints on the staff performance appraisal in Chinese style management.

The performance appraisal is a useful tool to help employees make self-criticism in order to do a more satisfactory job in the future. Prof. Zeng argues that the work of appraising staff’s performance is to be premised on the basis of “getting problems solved and achieving the best possible result.” To get this purpose, Prof. Zeng believes that the manager first of all must set up reasonable criteria for assessment, that is right does not mean feasible. Chinese people favor the tripartite division way of thinking, which enables them to seek a third solution that has the merits of the both two (“right” and “wrong”) by combining them together. The only goal of the appraisal work is to get problems solved so as to arrive at a perfect state in management.

This paper also discusses Prof. Zeng’s suggestion to Take the most reasonable way to deal with staff’s mistakes, since it is inevitable for a person to make mistakes. Prof. Zeng puts forward a few tips for dealing with the problem of making a pointless general review about the staff’s performance. First, place the blame on corporate policies and institutional system at the performance evaluation meeting instead of straightforwardly reprimanding the concerned employees which can serve as a kind of encouragement mechanism both to the manager and the staff, assuring them to be relaxed. Second, have a private face-to face talk with the corresponding person, and encourage him to make a clear description and explanation about the mistakes he has made. Third, give the employee a second chance to make up for his mistakes.

“Heaven has the virtue of cherishing life”, and therefore Prof. Zeng argues that we must do “saving” instead of the “killing” in the performance appraisal, which goes against the heaven. Now that the performance appraisal does not aim at evaluating whether staff’s performance is right or wrong, but at getting problems solved completely in order to achieve satisfactory results, it is agreed upon that on some occasions it is useless to do things right if it cannot help to achieve the best possible results, so knowing in their minds that accusing the wrongdoer frankly and relentlessly can only catalyze the enterprise’s downward spiral, and eventually leave it divided they always try to avoid taking drastic measures so as to keep the harmony and unity of the team. Hence, everyone is kept well informed that the purpose of the performance appraisal is to “save”, helping employees correct their mistakes rather than “kill” people, or kick them out or asking them to find another job because of their underperformance by providing employees with specific and measurable evaluation criteria and timely feedback. In addition, the manager must provide whatever assistance needed to ensure that the subordinates are able to repair their mistakes.

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