

Non-verbal aspects play an important part in performance appraisal interviews

October 4 2013, by Tea Kalska



The course of a performance appraisal interview depends on many other aspects besides words, notes a recent study.

The objective of this study, which was led by Senior University Lecturer Pekka Pälli from the School of Business, was to examine the behaviour of superiors and subordinates in performance appraisal interviews.

Pälli explains that while performance appraisal interviews have been the object of many studies, there is little research data on how people act and communicate non-verbally in an authentic interview.

The study was commissioned by the Finnish Work Environment Fund, and it was jointly carried out by the School of Business and Hanken School of Economics. The theme was approached by analysing video tapes of authentic performance appraisal interviews. The material comprised 26 interviews in three different sectors: a church organisation, municipal day care services and an insurance sector organisation.

Protective shields and supporting pillars

The most striking features emerging from the research material were [body language](#), the important role of paper, role talk and the way instrumentalisation infiltrates performance appraisal interviews.

Pälli reveals that documents are almost like a third participant in the interviews, a major part of the interaction.

'It is at times difficult for people to encounter each other face to face. What if the subordinate bursts into tears? At times, superiors tended to hold documents in front of their faces like a shield.'

In some cases, the participants closely followed the contents of the document and made appeal to it. They could, for example, read out parts of the organisation's strategy and explain how it related to their work in practice.

Body language revealed that the participants often saw the strategy as something distant and unattainable.

'When talking about the strategy, their hand movements pointed up and to the left. When talking about their own work, they brought their hands closer to the body.'

Imprisoned by the role and the form

Sometimes a participant's voice changed, and he or she started spouting officialese. This is known as role talk.

'Role talk has a negative impact on dialogue. It may be difficult for the superior to grasp the actual situation if the subordinate's answers are quotations from the textbook.'

According to Pälli, dialogue may also be disrupted if the interaction becomes instrumentalised. For example, this means that the discussion is overly reliant on a pre-written manuscript, or it progresses on the terms of a form.

'If the superior and the subordinate start discussing the correct interpretation of certain section in the form or the meaning of a term, they will be distracted from the actual subject. A form, too, may serve as a way of avoiding an encounter on a personal level.'

Become aware of your gestures

The observations of the study could also be useful for superiors by helping them become aware of their unconscious body language. A performance appraisal interview is a hierarchical situation, in which the subordinate pays attention to the superior's gestures and constantly interprets them.

However, Pälli does not believe that the signs of a good performance appraisal interview are unambiguous.

'People typically hate performance appraisal interviews in the belief that they make no difference. Sometimes the actual interview may feel

successful but still fails to have an impact in practice. The interview may also leave the participants feeling cold while ultimately leading into problems being sorted.'

Provided by Aalto University

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