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The power of positive reinforcement

THE LADDER
By VICTORIA GURVICH

IS IT nearing that time of the year again? Whether you're an employee, or a manager who conducts annual performance appraisals, do you love them or dread them?

"Most people dislike appraisals," says Russell Johnson, managing director of career management company EPR International, who adds that appraisals can be demoralising if wrongly conducted.

Andrew Jones, a training consultant with RTK Corporate, whose work includes performance-appraisal training as part of managing psychological risk in the workplace, says managers should look for opportunities to affirm staff members throughout the year. Often, the only feedback staff receive is when they have made a mistake, so they will naturally go into an appraisal feeling fearful, he says.

"When affirmation is given once a year (during an appraisal), and is very quickly followed up by criticism, it's very hollow," Mr Jones says.

How can managers help improve the appraisal process? Mr Johnson advises managers: "Remember that the point of the exercise is to help the individual concerned succeed. It's not about focusing on their weaknesses but how they can use and further develop their strengths."

If weaknesses need to be addressed, he says, this should be done at the time, or as near as possible, to the occurrence, not during the appraisal.

"There shouldn't be surprises in the appraisal," Mr Johnson says, and discussions should take place more than just once a year. It is very difficult, he says, for anyone to focus on how they can improve if they are hit with a long list of problems or criticisms during their appraisal.

Mr Johnson says performance should be reviewed against objective measures or previously agreed goals, and the process needs to be motivating. "Set new goals that will give the employee room to stretch... Determine, through discussion with the individual, how you can help them achieve their goals."

MY RESUME

David Gorski, 33, is a Qantas first officer.

When did you know you wanted to be a pilot?
Ever since I can remember. I was attracted by the excitement and the technology. I also had phases when I wanted to be in the police force.

How did you get into flying?
In my last years at Balwyn High School I was in the Air Training Corps, part of the RAAF. This was for young people to help develop an interest in flying. I learned to fly as a cadet, attending flying training during school holidays. I knew I wanted to join the military as the first step in my career. The cadets was pretty involving. I absolutely loved it.

After school?
I was accepted into the Australian army for pilot training. I did the officer training and fixed-wing flying courses and was posted to the Australian Defence Force Helicopter School but I didn't finish the course. I left the army and applied to join the Victoria Police. I had temporarily lost direction in my aviation career and wanted to take a step back. I thought the police force would satisfy a prior interest, I'd learn new skills and save money to do private flying training. But I liked the police force more than I'd envisaged and stayed for almost seven years.



What did you enjoy most about the police force?
I enjoyed police work and the variety. It was different every day. Apart from the practical aspects, you learn to deal with people, decision-making, responsibility. You've got to make good decisions that are safe and legal and think quickly under pressure. A lot of these thought processes are really applicable to flying.

Did you continue flying?
I didn't fly for a couple of years but I knew it was only a matter of time

before I went back to it. About four years into the police force I began training for a commercial pilot's licence, at a private school at Moorabbin. With every bit of leave I'd be enrolled in a theory course. I received my licence in July 2000.

What next?
I heard about an opportunity to apply for a Qantas cadetship — which was very enticing! I applied and was selected. That was in March 2001. It was more than a dream come true. I thought my whole life had come together.

After the cadetship?
My cadetship was six months because I already had a commercial pilot's licence. I was offered a position as a pilot and started training to be a second officer of a 747-400.

What was your role as a second officer?
I spent four years as a second officer. The primary role is as a relief co-pilot, assisting the captain and first officer during take-off and landing, plus safety roles, and preparing to become a first officer. I

was on 747-400s flying to places including Paris, Frankfurt, London, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangkok and Auckland... The hours were all over the place and I was away a lot.

What was next for you?
I wanted to become a 737 first officer and when an availability arose I started training. That was in January. I'll be doing predominantly domestic and Australasian trips.

The highlight of your job?
Flying. Even if I have a 4.20am start, once I've got to the airport and taken off as the sun is rising, I forget about the early wake-up. To capture those moments is worth everything.

Challenges?
There is continual study and development — you've got to work hard to advance.

What qualities/skills do pilots need?
You've got to be conservative — not a risk-taker. Maturity, leadership and decision-making ability, calm under pressure, communication skills and you've got to have technical skills and knowledge.

Advice to aspiring pilots?
Consider joining the Air Cadets, it's amazing. It's a competitive industry so you need to be sure about wanting to be a pilot and which area of aviation you want to go into.

If an employee has low self-esteem, identify their strengths and remind them of what they bring to the organisation, he says.

Executive and performance coach Jacquie Wise says appraisals should be a two-way process that links the performance of individuals with that of the organisation as a whole. Employees need feedback. Their performance may suffer for a variety of reasons, and training and support may be needed. The discussion can help employers identify procedures that are working and those that need changing.

Employees should be asked "what are their key responsibilities, what have they done best and least well, what can be done to capitalise on their strengths, what obstacles have they encountered and what are their plans for the future".

Miss Wise advises managers to "give affirmation, look at areas that need to be worked on together, and then affirm again". She says a good leader will also have occasional "how's it going?" chats with staff between appraisals.

It is essential for managers to be prepared for appraisals, she says, and they should check that the staff member's position description is up-to-date and review the previous discussion. What was agreed upon and was it done?

Leaders often require training, Ms Wise says, as sensitive issues may arise and there may

be a need for career or grief counselling, for example.

Overall, the idea of appraisals is to be constructive, says RTK's Mr Jones.

"If you have a destructive conversation, it's not contributing to anything. If there is criticism it's got to be put in a way that says 'we can do better' or 'we can get around this'."

And he says there should also be an opportunity for staff to provide feedback about their manager — employees should be able to say, for example, if they need more direction or more freedom.

Nick Deligiannis, senior regional director of Hays recruitment firm in Victoria, also advises thorough preparation, perhaps using examples of work collected during the year.

"Structure the meeting. Provide constructive feedback. Set SMART — specific measurable attainable relevant time-scaled — objectives," and, he says, do as much listening as talking.

An effective appraisal, combining clearly set objectives, can be, Mr Deligiannis says, a very important tool in engaging, retaining, and investing in, staff. Time frames should be set to regularly measure specific objectives.

He says appraisals can be an excellent opportunity to provide information about where the employee is going; choosing the best way to get there; measuring their progress along the way; and correcting the

direction if they're heading off course. And open communication channels, he says, should lead to a positive outcome for both manager and employee. **Next week: performance appraisal advice for employees.**

Liquid assets

Do you have an understanding of sustainability issues and an interest in working in the water industry? Melbourne Water, which runs a graduate development program over three years, is looking for university students who will complete their course this year (graduating next year) in a range of disciplines such as science and engineering (including those with double degrees in commerce, arts or law).

Applicants should possess strong interpersonal, communication and problem-solving



Work to save water. PICTURE: HEATH MISSEN

skills. For details, go to melbournewater.com.au/careers. Applications close on June 9.

Medical marvels

The world's first full-procedure epidural simulator, designed to train doctors in delivering epidural pain relief, last month won Innovic's 2006 Next Big Thing award.

The talking patient simulator, known as Mediseus, was the brainchild of Victorian-based Medic Vision Pty Ltd. It will help reduce the risks in the epidural process (which is most commonly used in obstetrics for pain control during childbirth).

Medic Vision was one of 21 finalists in Innovic's national award, which was created to parade new innovations. Innovic, which helps more than 1600 innovators a year, is a not-for-profit company supported by the Victorian Government. Its chief executive, Joss Evans, says the judges were impressed with the way Medic Vision tackled a tricky problem.

"For the first time, the world's doctors are able to practise on an interactive simulator which responds to the physical stimuli of the epidural and can tell students when they are about to make a mistake," she says.

The People's Choice award went to a personal alert system that sends SMS alerts to carers' mobile phones whenever help is required. Known as PANDA —

WORKWORDS

"I've got a woman's ability to stick to a job and get on with it when everyone else walks off and leaves it."

MARGARET THATCHER



personal alert night and day at home — it was developed by Geoff Foley, of Mount Eliza.

The two-way wireless device can also send messages to the user and does not require call centre intervention.

Selling the game

The Hawthorn Football Club is searching for an energetic and proactive marketing director. Applicants should be able to manage a large sales and marketing team. The role is based at the club's new headquarters, Waverley Park in Mulgrave.

Inquiries to Brent Skinner or Joe Thymian, at Tanner Menzies, on 9825 4102.

Send information for The Ladder to: vgurvich@theage.com.au

