

PRINCIPAL APPRAISAL

**A PERSONAL LOOK AT THE
EFFECTIVE OF APPRAISALS
CONDUCTED BY THE AUTHOR
OVER THE LAST SEVEN YEARS**

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BACKGROUND:

General:

In 2004, the Central South office of the Ministry of Education set up a course for people involved in carrying out principals' appraisals in the region.

It seemed that more and more schools were opting for an outside appraiser to carry out the principal's appraisal rather than the earlier model of the Board of Trustees Chairperson doing it.

There were not many people doing appraisals – most that were, were ex-principals – and the local Ministry wanted to build up a resource of experienced and well-trained people who could carry out effective, professional appraisals.

The course was taken by Dr Eileen Piggott-Irvine. It ran over 2 days covering background theories about the process of appraisal in general, and appraisal of principals specifically. Dr Piggott-Irvine presented several models, talked about the ethics of appraisal, the importance of high trust and integrity in the process, and the need to be rigorous both in the obtaining of information and data, and in the conclusions presented.

After participants had completed the course, they had to carry out several appraisals and submit their paperwork, and a report on the process, to Dr Piggott-Irvine. The principals who had been appraised were also asked to report on the appraisal to her.

If all was satisfactory, participants were 'passed' by Dr Piggott-Irvine and became accredited appraisers. The newly accredited appraisers were then on a Ministry database and were also encouraged to put their names on the WRPPA (Wellington Regional Primary Principals' Association) website so they could be accessed by other principals and Boards of Trustees who were seeking an outside appraiser.

Personal:

Just before this course was set up, I had been approached by a local principal to conduct her appraisal. I was already involved with the First Time Principals Programme (FTPP) as a mentor and had, of course, the model of my own appraisals. These were my only experiences of the appraisal process and I was grateful for the opportunity to learn more about conducting appraisals and to have a model that I could use or adapt as an appraiser.

I was keen to add in some elements of the FTPP mentoring programme because, to my mind, the reflective elements of the mentoring could be a useful part of the appraisal process. I had always used my own appraisers as both a check on my goals and work within the school – as a way of getting feedback from staff on my leadership – and as a sounding board and advisory service.

Since then, I have conducted over 25 appraisals (four are currently being undertaken) and felt it was time I got feedback on those appraisals. Up to this point, I conducted an appraisal and wrote a report and that was really the end of the process.

I enjoy the appraisal work, I feel I learn from each one I do and have elements to bring back to my own school, and wish to continue with this work. But I have never formally sought any feedback on the process from those I have appraised.

It was something I felt I would do ‘sometime’ but in the busy life of a principal the ‘sometime’ kept being put off. I presumed, from the fact that most of my appraisees asked me back for a second time, that the way I conducted an appraisal was, at the least, satisfactory.

I had also spoken informally with some principals who had expressed their satisfaction with the process and, in a couple of instances, was told by a principal that ERO had felt the principal’s appraisal had been robust and effective.

The sabbatical provided me with time to think of what I wanted to ask and to conduct a survey of all those I had appraised. I asked several questions:

- a general rating of the usefulness of the appraisal;
- how the goals were set;
- what insights or new learning the appraisal had provided;

- what they would do, and/or would like an appraiser to do, differently;
- whether, if an appraisal were not a compliance, would they have one.
- I also asked, if they said “no” to the last question, what they might do instead for a way of getting feedback and continuing to develop professionally.

THE PROCESS:

The process was a reasonably informal one. The questionnaire was to be anonymous (although two respondents signed theirs) and I had the returned forms sent to a principal colleague who did an initial collation for me.

The questionnaire was as outlined above. I wanted to keep it simple and short. (Principals are forever being asked to complete questionnaires from a variety of sources and get a bit ‘surveyed out’.)

I sent out 23 surveys and received 18 completed ones back.

RESULTS:

Question 1: How useful to you was the appraisal?

Not at all useful?

Not very useful?

Somewhat useful?

Reasonably useful?

Very useful?

All the respondents said that the appraisal had been reasonably useful (3) or very useful (15). I am happy with this level of satisfaction with the appraisal.

Comment:

Overall, the appraisals had delivered positive, affirming results and feedback to the individual principals. In two instances there had been

very challenging messages in the feedback so, for the principals concerned, the findings of the appraisal had either come as a complete surprise or had confirmed a feeling they had that all was not well. With five principals choosing not to respond to this survey, it may be that these two principals were among those who did not reply and, if they had, might have rated the appraisal more negatively.

Question 2: How were your goals set?

Fig 1:

Principal set the goals.	7
Board of Trustees set the goals.	0
Principal and BOT set them together.	13
The goals came directly from the Strategic/Annual Plan.	12
A combination of above or other method.	5 (Set in discussion with the appraiser)

Comment:

It appears that the majority of goals were set with the Principal and the Board working together and using the school's goals for the year as a reference point. When I went in to have the initial interview, to set up the scope and shape of the appraisal with the Board chairperson and the principal, I always suggested that the goals should reflect, along with the Professional Standards for Principals, the work of the school that year and anything that may have arisen from the previous appraisal.

(I didn't ask the question about who selects the appraiser, but from informally asking principals I have worked with, it appears that the choice is usually made by the principal or the principal in consultation with their Board chairperson.

They have either found out about possible appraisers from asking other principals or by accessing the WRPPA - Wellington Principals' Assn - website.

In only two instances have I been directly approached by a board chairperson – and in one case the chairperson had a very definite agenda. It certainly seems to be a more positive process if the principal and chairperson are both happy with the choice of appraiser.)

Question 3: If the appraisal was a worthwhile exercise, what was particularly useful about it?

Some aspects to consider:

- What did you learn or use from the appraisal?
- Was it affirming? Challenging?
- Were there insights into your practice you wouldn't have otherwise got?

Fig 2:

What principals found useful:

The principal was alerted to issues in the school	3
The principal learnt what others thought of his/her leadership	10
Appraisal was affirming	13
Appraisal was challenging	6
Further goals could be set from it	8
It led to improvements in the school	5
It confirmed principal 'suspicions' about something in the school	3
Having such wide feedback (360o)	6
Having in-depth discussion with an independent professional colleague	6
Having a formal process of reflection and self-appraisal	9

Comments:

Many comments were made by the principals in answer to this question. In analysing what was written the above categories appeared to be the main themes and benefits emerging. Many said the appraisal was both affirming and challenging.

One principal wrote:

“I realised I couldn’t take anything for granted – I assumed things were better than they were, especially communication.

The appraisal was both affirming and left me with some challenges that needed to be rectified.

The appraisal alerted me to a number of issues, some that were not directly related to me.”

Another:

“It was affirming to know the positive things staff thought about me and challenging to have to face things that I recognised to be true but had not acknowledged prior to the appraisal.”

And another:

“ It was a great opportunity for reflection. It gave me focus and was both affirming and challenging. It definitely improved my practice and gave me an opportunity to reflect on philosophy and beliefs and how they actually were portrayed across the school. It was important to urge me to change some practice.”

The above were very typical comments about what principals had gained from their appraisal.

It seemed that principals welcomed the chance to talk about, and reflect on, their practice with someone who had no stake in the school. For those who were interviewed or surveyed as part of each appraisal, this “outside of the school” factor was important. Not Board, staff, principal nor parents saw me as anything but an independent ear and voice who was genuinely seeking feedback on behalf of the Board and principal which would, hopefully, affirm positive aspects of the principal’s leadership and make suggestions for possible improvement.

Question 4: In hindsight, was there any aspect of the process you would change? (In other words, if it was an unhelpful process - or some parts of it were unhelpful – how could it have been improved?)

Fig 3:
What would you change/improve in the process?

No change	Possible changes (varied)	Changes to the survey and/or way it is conducted	No comment made
8	4	4	2

Comments:

The most comments about changes concerned the staff survey. The survey, in nearly all cases, was one given to all staff in each appraisal.

It had a series of questions under the headings of:

- Leading Learning
- Vision and Strategic Thinking
- Staff Support
- Communication
- Relationships
- Student Support

and respondents were asked to rate a series of statements as *Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, Not Applicable*.

There was also space for comments underneath each heading.

Four principals felt there was not a lot of value in anonymous surveys as they could not follow up on negative ratings or comments when they didn't know who was 'unhappy' with their performance or some aspect of school life.

The comment was also made that some staff could use the survey unfairly just to 'have a go' at the principal who then had no right of reply.

One principal also felt that newish staff should not be surveyed as they really didn't always know how the school worked, so were not in a position to comment.

Four other principals made suggestions for change/improvement including:

- Interviewing staff earlier in the year (I usually did these interviews in Term 4);
- Having extra meetings with the principal during the year;
- Interviewing fewer staff using more in-depth questions;
- Giving brief verbal feedback on the day before I leave the school (I thought I always did but must have missed that time.).

Question 5: If an appraisal was not a requirement, would you have one? Why or why not?

This question engendered a lot of quite detailed reflective responses.

In summary:

12/18 said they would have an appraisal even if it were not a compliance issue. Their reasons were very close to the reasons they gave for the appraisals being useful to them. One felt that if an appraisal was something required of staff, then they should also submit to the same process.

2/18 said they wouldn't. They felt by and large, an appraisal didn't really change practice and one said that an appraisal just "*made you feel good or bad for a while*" but made no big changes in the long term.

1/18 said they would have one but less often.

3/18 said maybe but it really would depend on the appraiser they could get.

Question 6: If you said “No” to Question 5, is there a process or system you would use instead to build your leadership skills and develop you professionally?

Only 4/18 answered this question (see numbers above). Two said they would use the Ariki Project instead. Another was involved in a PPLC and the fourth would prefer to use a critical friend.

CONCLUSIONS:

I feel satisfied that the principles and processes I learnt from working with Dr Piggott-Irvine, and the skills I have developed through working with principals on their appraisals, are working well and that there is a high rate of satisfaction.

I feel that, overall, the shape and scope I have developed works well and has provided principals with useful information about their practice and leadership.

The area of my appraisal format I need to reflect on and make changes to, in discussion with those I may appraise in the future, is the use and structure of any staff – or other - survey I use.

I have talked with others involved in appraising principals about this quandary. Some ask for a time, such as the beginning of a staff meeting, while they are in the school, to distribute the survey and have staff fill them in on the spot.

This practice would have the advantage of not letting a little clique get together to answer in a similar vein. (This has happened once or twice, I suspect, and quite negative feedback was given to principals. The comments made were, to my mind, a little too similar to be entirely coincidental!)

The downside of staff completing the survey in a short time-frame at a meeting, is that it can become a rushed job. Those who prefer to take time to answer thoughtfully, could feel very pressured.

The statements for staff to respond to, also need revising so they come more in line with new professional standards for principals. There is still room, however, to have statements and questions that give a ‘climate read-out’ on the school.

Because I am currently a principal in my own school, I have developed a system whereby I go into the school in Term 1 to meet and set goals, scope the appraisal and so on, with the principal and the Board chairperson. The principal and I then finalise the goals, usually by email, to be appraised later. That is the end until I visit the school in Term 4 for up to a day and interview staff, see documentation, talk to children and parents, and have discussions with the principal.

Most seem happy with this model but I would be able to accommodate anyone who wanted a midway visit and discussion. For a more intense involvement than this, I would be suggesting they chose another appraiser, simply because of my time constraints.

This sabbatical has given me the time and impetus to do this review of my work. I really enjoy working with other principals and conducting their appraisals. I find I get much from it for my own professional development. I thought about the last two questions and wondered what I would respond. I do see a lot of value in having an independent eye cast over my practice and having someone from outside the school take a critical look at my leadership; to see how it is impinging on others and whether or not it is effective in leading a learning culture.

I want to thank the Ministry for this opportunity. This is a ‘small’ study but one that is very important to me. I would not want to be conducting further appraisals if I thought they were serving no-one.

Thank you also to those who took the time to respond. I value your feedback and, because I don’t know who you all are, I just hope you may get to read this report and accept my thanks.

Louellen Bonallack

Principal

Ngati Toa School.

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