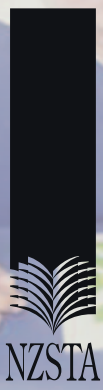




HELPFUL CONVERSATIONS

Wairarapa College

*A case study of support staff at Wairarapa College,
a co-educational, State secondary school*



Summary

What's this document for?

This is a case study of support staff at Wairarapa College, a co-educational, State secondary school. This case study is part of the Support Staff Working Group final report.

What are the key themes of this case study?

- The importance and benefits of engaging staff.
- Ensuring systems are meaningful.

Why did the school change its approach to support staff?

They wanted to treat the support staff professionally, as they do their teachers. It was also a way to ensure that two-way feedback and professional development occurred on a regular, rather than an ad hoc, basis.

What did they do?

The college has introduced and maintained a performance appraisal system that focuses particularly on supporting staff to perform.

What was the result?

The appraisal system has helped the school understand, recognise and value the contribution of support staff. It has improved communication between support staff, their manager and the teachers in the school.

What are they planning to do next?

They want to move to more explicitly tying the appraisal system to the strategic goals and plans of the school.

What the support staff said

- "It's great ... a chance to voice fears or dissatisfactions or concerns."
- "You know where you are going."
- "The informal stuff happens, it's gone, there's no record ... this gives you a benchmark, it helps you see how things have moved."

Discussion questions

1. What does our school do that helps encourage and assist the performance of support staff? Could we do this better?
2. If there is a performance appraisal system that is used for support staff in your school, is it a 'tick box' affair, or is it a meaningful and useful tool? Would others in the school see it that way as well?
3. What is the range of strategies our school uses to provide professional development? Do we make good use of the full range of possibilities?

Helpful conversations

For support staff at Wairarapa College, performance appraisal is now a regular part of their year. Teachers at the school had been doing it for a while. The principal then raised the question, “Why are we not doing the same for support staff?”

The results have benefited staff, their manager and the school. Support staff report, “It’s great ... a chance to voice fears or dissatisfactions or concerns.” “You know where you are going.” For the executive officer and manager of most of the support staff, it has helped build ongoing relationships, gain a better understanding of her staff’s jobs, and to recognise and respond to changes.

For the school, it has helped to monitor workloads so they can adjust duties and hours to better match the needs of the school and the staff.

In many organisations, performance appraisals become a ‘tick box’ affair that has to be done and got out of the way. Wairarapa College has managed to design and keep it a meaningful tool.

Structuring the conversation

So how have they done it? They have deliberately gone for a simple system that can evolve and develop. Using appraisal systems from other organisations and schools to prompt their thinking, they decided to use a process where both the person being appraised (appraisee) and the

person responsible for the appraisal (appraiser) prepare independently prior to meeting together on an annual basis to discuss and document their conclusions. The appraisee is asked to think about:

- What have you done to help the school in your role over the last year?
- Did you find any difficulties or barriers in your work and, if so, what were they?
- What would you like to do/achieve within your work over the next year?
- What staff development would you see as being helpful to you over the next year?
- What support did you receive during the past year from your manager and/or colleagues; what support might you want to receive in the future?
- Feedback/ideas. (You might want to suggest something that would result in more effective running of the school; for example, revised procedure, communication channels, and so on.)

The joint discussion then focuses on:

- progress since the last appraisal
- any ongoing or new areas of concern
- setting goals for the coming year
- professional development needs and options.

Getting started

The concept of performance appraisals was initially introduced to support staff as a group with an opportunity to comment on the draft tools. With a few of the staff who were not sure about the idea, the executive officer also took the time to talk with them individually. Reactions were generally positive, but some were uncertain. “Many of my staff had worked here for 15 to 20 years, some were in their sixties. They had never had any system before. Most had never been asked about professional development. It was not surprising some had doubts.”

Support staff explain that it was the emphasis on understanding their contribution and helping their development that reassured those with concerns. Terminology was also important. Avoiding jargon and using plain language that focused on what it was really about. Even the concept of setting goals was foreign to some staff,



which is why the focus was instead on what people would like to do or achieve within their work.

Staff are expected to prepare for the appraisal discussion by thinking about the prompt questions and reviewing their job descriptions to check they are still relevant. The manager prepares by talking with others who work closely with the staff member and reviewing the agreements from the last discussion.

The first year the discussions took longer, with most discussions taking an hour or more. Staff were not used to thinking about their work in this way; the manager had a lot to learn about what their staff actually did, and some staff were a little apprehensive about how the conversation might go. Since then greater comfort and familiarity have meant it typically takes less time.

Three-way communication

The system has strengthened three-way communication. It has helped staff communicate with their manager. They have found it useful to have a particular time to deliberately reflect on issues or concerns. Although they appreciate the informal conversations, one support staff member commented, “The informal stuff happens, it’s gone, there’s no record ... this gives you a benchmark, it helps you see how things have moved.”



The executive officer is clear that this process does not replace the ongoing conversations that need to occur throughout the year. You need both. But this gives her a chance to make sure she has listened to and consulted with all of her staff in a systematic, meaningful way. “This is my chance to really get a feel for what they do, particularly for staff scattered throughout the school who I don’t see every day.”

The third communication bridge is between support staff and teachers. At the conclusion of the round of performance discussions, the executive officer develops a list of follow-up actions required, which always includes ideas and key messages to communicate to teachers so that they can help support staff assist teachers more effectively. This reinforces and facilitates direct communication between support staff and the teachers they work with.

Professional development

The system puts an emphasis on professional development. Together, the manager and her staff have found different solutions depending on the needs of the individual and their role. These have included:

- getting skilled staff to run workshops for their colleagues
- attending cluster meetings at neighbouring schools
- participating in networks related to their area of work, with their time and travel paid for
- investigating how other schools do things
- setting up buddying systems to share skills.

The manager is clear that although there is a place for training courses, cluster groups and networks usually provide the greatest value and are the most cost effective. She cautions that some staff jump at the opportunity, but for others you have to deliberately broker the introduction. The appraisal system ensures that all support staff have the opportunity for professional development.

Contributing to the big picture

The system is about more than the performance and development of individuals. It also helps the school to take a deliberate and regular look at role allocations and the distribution of workloads. It has equipped the school to make adjustments to match changing needs of both individuals and the school. It has helped the school better utilise the strengths and skills of individual staff, to plan the succession of staff as they approach retirement, to shift resources from areas they were no longer needed to areas of demand and to get staff input into how things could be organised more efficiently.

Where to next?

The plan for the future is to create a more direct alignment with the school's strategic plan, something that good practice performance management emphasises. However although this is easy for some roles, such as the school's nurse, it is harder for support roles that are more reactive.

Preliminary thinking suggests that this may require another dimension to the strategic planning process and opportunities for support staff to be involved in bigger picture discussions.

Is it worth it?

To make a system like this work takes time and effort. Time needs to be set aside for preparation, discussion and write-up. The credibility of the system requires follow-through on the commitments that are made. The executive officer is very clear that it is worth the investment. "It is so much more efficient than being the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff."

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Wairarapa College is a State secondary school located in Masterton. It is a decile 6 school with a roll of 1,128.

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