

# Key Features of Appraisal Effectiveness

Dr Eileen Piggot-Irvine

Director, NZPLC

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## Introduction

This paper initially provides an overview of performance management and appraisal in schools in New Zealand (NZ), briefly backgrounding the context and purposes as well as the legislative framework. One principal appraisal cycle is provided as an example of an approach fitting the intended development and accountability balance of the nationally mandated guidelines.

In the later component of the paper the author's conclusions on the key features of effectiveness of appraisal are examined. These conclusions are drawn from the findings of three converging, but distinctive, studies conducted by the author between 1996 and 2001.

## Performance Management as an Integrated Cycle of Micro-Processes

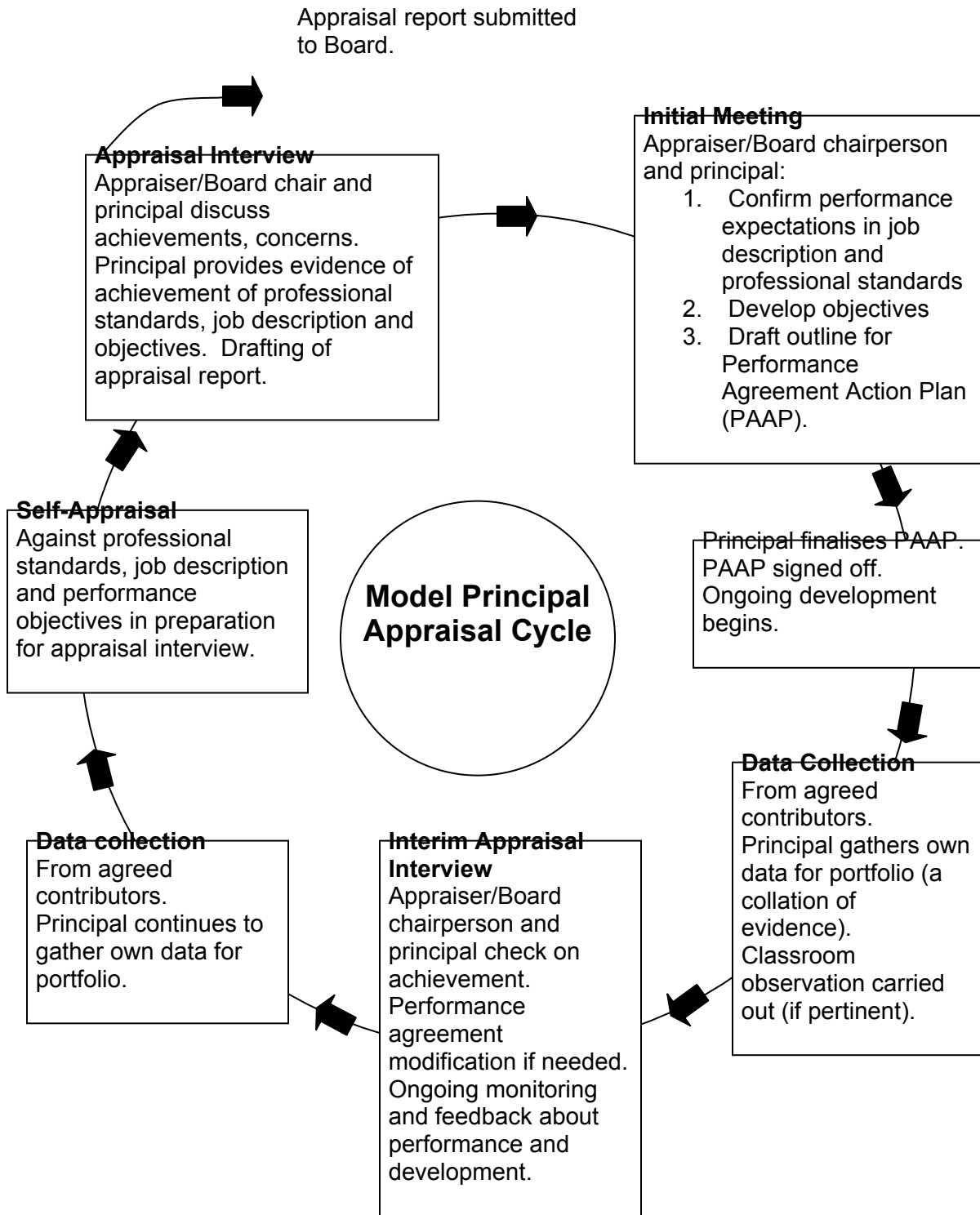
Performance management is a macro-descriptor that encompasses all of the micro-processes associated with personnel management. It covers the functions that begin when a staff member enters the school through to their exit. In NZ, the Ministry of Education (MoE) document Performance Management Systems 1 (PMS1; MoE, 1997:1) describes it as encompassing recruitment, retention, selection, appointment, employment contracts, registration, appraisal and assessment, professional development, career development, succession planning, remuneration, discipline, and dismissal. Performance management is therefore the bigger picture within which appraisal is located. This is an important point to clarify because many principals confuse the two terms and use them interchangeably.

## Appraisal

Appraisal, although only one contributing micro-process in the macro context, is central to the effectiveness of performance management. The mandated guidelines for appraisal in NZ (MoE, 1997) designate that clarification of performance expectations is a first step in appraisal. Here a job description, covering nationally prescribed professional standards, and a performance agreement (with development objectives) are written and ratified. The clarification of expectations is followed by professional development, monitoring of development objectives, data collection, observation of teaching if appropriate, self-appraisal, checking professional standards, a final interview and reporting. The following cycle represented in Figure 1 reflects the integrated development and accountability intent of the MoE guidelines. Note that the term "Board" refers to the governing body of each school.

Getting the right balance of accountability and development in appraisal is difficult and, in this author's opinion, is associated with several key features linked to effectiveness. The background to the findings that the features were derived from is provided prior to discussion of the features themselves.

**Figure 1: A Principal Appraisal Cycle (Piggot-Irvine, 2001)**



## **The Research Leading to Conclusions about the Key Features of Appraisal**

Between 1996 and 1999 the author was contracted to facilitate training associated with the introduction of the mandated guidelines for appraisal (see Cardno, 1999, for a review of aspects of the training). Throughout this period (and subsequently in 2000 and 2001) data was collected to both monitor the implementation status of appraisal generally and to evaluate the impact of the training delivered. The findings cited in support of the conclusions for the features of effective appraisal noted in this paper were collected from three separate but parallel studies conducted during this 1996 to 2001 period.

The first study occurred as a type of exploratory, "State of Play" study, involving an average of 70 appraisers nationally each year from 1996 to 1999 (see Piggot-Irvine, 2000 for sampling detail). In early 1996, as preparation for the training (a needs analysis), initial data was collected on the general implementation status of appraisal. The 1996 results provided an alert that some aspect of the training needed to be focused on helping appraisers to establish trusting, open, non-defensive, yet problem-confronting relationships. The development of such openness via an "educative process" (Piggot-Irvine, 2001) was subsequently included in training conducted by this author. On-going data collection in the "State of Play" study continued during 1997 to 1999 in order to monitor the impact of the mandated requirements and training on appraisal implementation. In summary, the results of this study revealed that the tightening of requirements for appraisal and training had an overall positive impact on almost all aspects of appraisal systems implementation (for example policy development, process establishment) but that there was variable implementation of these processes in schools (Piggot-Irvine, 2000). The results also provided a strong indication that much of the training conducted nationally for appraisal had largely been superficial and had failed to help appraisers to confront problems with appraisees.

The second study was an evaluation of the educative process component of training for 219 appraisers from 25 secondary schools. The overall training covered general skills implementation (two to three days) as well as one day focusing on developing the type of educative process elaborated earlier in this paper. Here, data that was collected from a sample of 45 appraisers (and their appraisees) showed a considerable gap between appraiser espousals of educative process skill implementation and their actual practice (Piggot-Irvine, 2001).

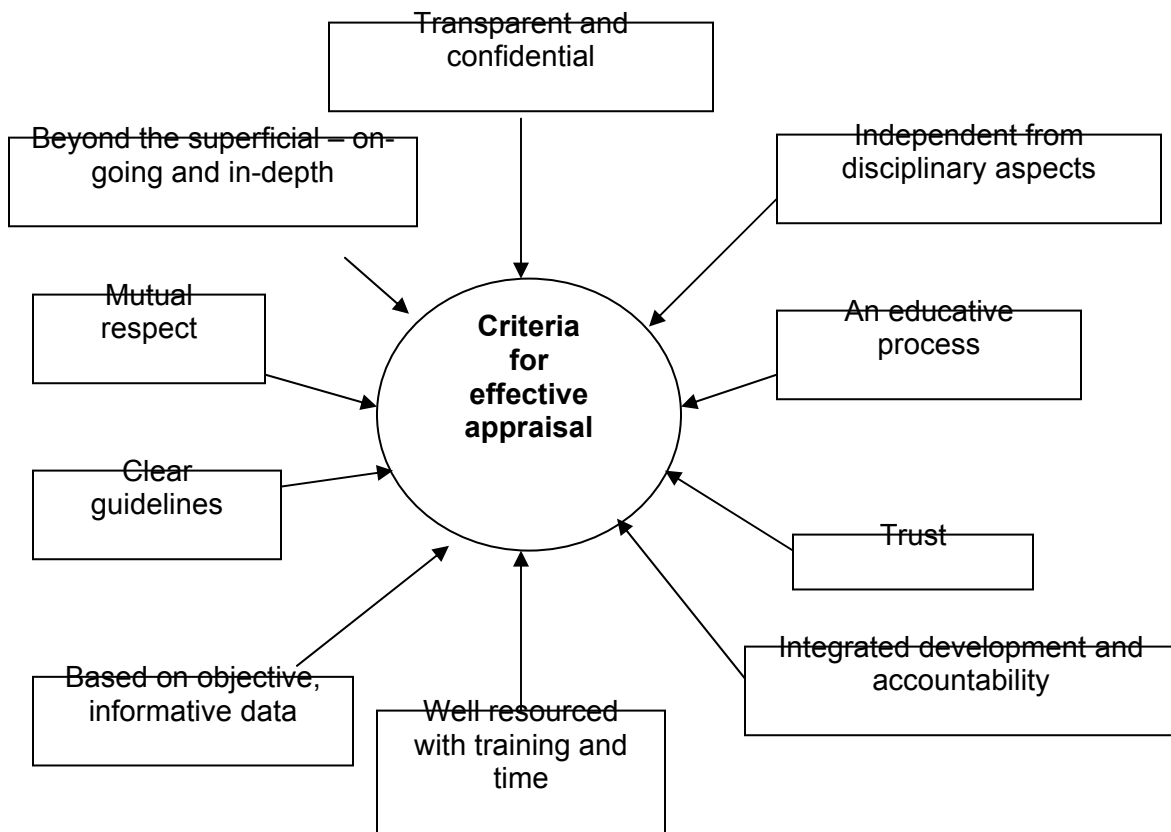
The third study was a more in-depth evaluation of longer-term (approximately eight meetings over one year) training based on an action research approach employing the Problem Resolving Action Research (PRAR) Model (Piggot-Irvine, 2001). The focus of this training, again, was on developing educative process interactions. Here the triangulated data from interviews, surveys and observation with appraisers and appraisees showed a positive shift in skills implementation for three of the five appraisers involved in the action research (see Piggot-Irvine, 2001).

The features of effective appraisal described in the following section have been developed from the data of all three studies.

### **Key Features of Effective Appraisal**

What does effective mean? In this author's terms effectiveness occurs when appraisal interactions are non-controlling, non-defensive, supportive, educative and yet confidential. Effective appraisal therefore is underpinned by a relationship of respect and has outcomes directly linked to improved learning and teaching. Effectiveness is also linked to appraisal processes and information that have clarity, objectivity and high integrity, where deep development is a goal rather than quick-fix expedience. The features described are not presented in order of significance - all are important, as Figure 2 shows.

**Figure 2: Elements of Appraisal Effectiveness**



**An Integrated Development and Accountability Approach**

Earlier in this paper the dual development and accountability components of an integrated appraisal cycle were described. Feedback from participants in all three of the studies conducted indicated the desirability of a retention of the balance between development and accountability in appraisal. A quote from a contributor to the “State of Play” data noted that appraisal had to be “An avenue to help staff identify future developments and highlight strengths/weaknesses” (Piggot-Irvine, 2001:71).

**Objective Information**

Results from the “State of Play” study pointed to a continued avoidance of appraisers and appraisees assembling objective information for appraisal (Piggot-Irvine, 2000). For example only 27 percent of respondents in 1996 reported that they assembled objective information; 26 percent in 1997. Although there was a rise to 59% in 1998, one respondent in that year suggested that observation was conducted in a loose way when they stated that information was gained as “Only informal casual observations” (Piggot-Irvine, 2001:57).

It is essential that discussions are based on factual, objectively collected, “data-based” (Cardno & Piggot-Irvine, 1996:20) information if the process is to be considered as a valid, fair, rigorous and reliable approach to managing the performance of staff. If such information is not collected then an outcome may be of perceptions of appraisal as a poorly constructed process that reinforces inadequate, inaccurate and subjective decision-making at management level. This, in turn, could lead (an hypothesis that needs checking) to a climate of substantial mistrust between managers and staff and the demise of appraisal as a credible process for enhancing organisational and individual improvement.

In particular, the lack of assemblage of objective information could create a potentially explosive situation given the current trend to associate promotion with appraisal. Lack of objective information could be linked to lack of transparency, subsequent iniquitous decision-making and injustice in summative decisions made about the most sensitive issue in teachers' lives, that is, their remuneration. A sense of injustice, in turn, could result in a proliferation of litigation between aggrieved staff and the governors whose responsibility it is to ensure an effective appraisal system.

What can be done about this? Foremost there should be an emphasis on the establishment of appraisal procedures that ensure valid information gathering. The use of triangulation, or "multiple perspective" (Cardno & Piggot-Irvine, 1996:20), data collection can enhance validity. In this author's practice in appraising principals, for example, there is a non-negotiable expectation that the cycle incorporates documentary evidence. Policies, procedures, self, student (if teaching), staff and Board (and possibly community) evaluations frequently form part of this evidence. In the case of the latter evaluations, the use of a sampling process and well designed data-collection tools can mean that this is an efficiently co-ordinated system that should not be overly burdensome in terms of time or cost to the school.

### **Confidential and Transparent Processes**

Implicitly linked to objective information gathering is the requirement for confidential and transparent processes. Both of these features were considered to be important by appraisers and appraisees in the short and long-term training evaluation studies cited. At first glance, the two descriptors of confidentiality and transparency may seem contradictory, or self-cancelling. This is a misconception. There is a logical congruency between confidentiality and transparency. As an appraiser it is important to be absolute in maintaining confidentiality in dealing with information, whether it is from respondents providing feedback, or documentary evidence, or information from the principal. However, an appraiser also needs to be clear, with all respondents providing information (for example in evaluations), that their information will not be tampered with or altered. The latter is an example of the way that an appraiser can be transparent about process in dedicating to represent the situation as it is, without own alteration or interpretation. It also shows that confidentiality is assured.

### **Setting Deep Objectives**

The findings from the three studies cited showed that a key to effective appraisal is the establishment of appraisal objectives and plans for improvement that are in a "deep" as opposed to "surface" format (Piggot-Irvine, 1999). Deep refers to plans that outline small action research type projects that are carried out on an individualised (for personal objectives) or group (for department or school-wide objectives) scale. The following example from a participant in the short-term training is such a deep plan. John, the appraisee, was guided by his appraiser but he wrote the plan. The latter is crucial if ownership by the appraisee is a goal. John's plan (Table 1) contains stages of reconnaissance (examining the current situation with the issue), planning for change/improvement, carrying out improvement and then evaluating its effectiveness. At all stages of the plan there are expectations of data-based reflection and an emphasis on improved learning and teaching.

**Table 1: John's PAAP (Performance Agreement Action Plan)**

Objective	Actions	Measurable Outcomes	Resources/\$ (Recorded for each action)	Date for Completion
<p>To improve the way that I facilitate meetings with staff so that I don't waste valuable learning and teaching time.</p>	<p><i>Reconnaissance</i></p>			
	<p>1. Check how I facilitate meetings currently by:                      a. asking staff to complete a quick response questionnaire on my effectiveness                      b. asking a colleague to check and record what I do in meetings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased personal knowledge of effective meeting facilitation, and a clear set of criteria for this</li> </ul>	<p>1a. Photocopying of questionnaire \$5.00</p> <p>1b. Nil</p>	<p>April 20th</p> <p>April 20th</p>
	<p>2. Do some reading on meeting facilitation and develop some criteria for effectiveness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved/more effective meeting facilitation as recorded in feedback from staff, and my observer colleague</li> </ul>	<p>2. Photocopying of articles \$5.00</p>	<p>June 1st</p>
	<p><i>Planning for Improvement</i></p> <p>3. Think about the results from the feedback etc. and develop a plan for the way I will improve</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More productive meetings: meetings that are not only more efficient but are focused on improved learning and teaching.</li> </ul>	<p>3. Nil</p>	<p>June 15th</p>
	<p><i>Carrying out Plan</i></p> <p>4. Attend a 2 hour workshop on meeting facilitation</p>		<p>4. Workshop fee \$80.00                      Travel \$20.00</p>	<p>June 20th</p>
	<p>5. Observe another manager who is reputed to facilitate good meetings</p>		<p>5. Nil</p>	<p>June 25th</p>
	<p>6. Put my plan for improved facilitation into practice for 2-3 meetings</p>		<p>6. Nil</p>	<p>End July</p>
<p><i>Evaluation</i></p> <p>7. Seek further feedback from staff on improvements, and ask my colleague to observe against my criteria for effective facilitation</p>		<p>7. Photocopying \$5.00</p>	<p>August 15th</p>	

John's plan is not a typical one observed in the short-term training. More frequently plans contained just a couple of sentences outlining development such as "attend a workshop on literacy". The latter is a quick-fix approach to objective setting: one that is concerned with getting the objective out of the way as quickly as possible rather than focusing substantially on something that results in considerable improvement to learning and teaching. It conforms to a surface approach which McKay and Kember (1997, p.58) state, is "based on a motive to minimise effort and also to minimise the consequences".

John's approach, however, is "deep". He is committed to a thorough examination of his facilitation of meetings, to changing his practice and then to checking to see if what he has done has worked. He is basing his decisions for change upon his reflections on data and background reading. It will cost the school no more than a surface approach to meet his development objectives and yet the outcome is most likely to be substantial change at both a personal and professional level. The development of such a deep plan also provides clear indicators for assessment of the achievement of objectives. The latter accountability feature helps to provide the objective data that was noted earlier as an important feature of the entire appraisal process.

### **Separation of Discipline Processes from Appraisal**

Participants in the evaluation of the short and long-term training on appraisal noted that an aspect that would jeopardise the development of trust and openness in appraisal was having the same personnel carrying out appraisal and disciplinary proceedings. Support for this critical separation has been reported elsewhere (Cardno & Piggot-Irvine, 1997). That is not to say that appraisal may not alert the appraiser and management to the areas that need to be addressed under discipline proceedings. Once the alert has occurred, however, either a different individual should carry out the disciplinary-based system, or if the appraiser is to be nominated as carrying out this process, then a new appraiser should be appointed.

The crucial separation of appraisal from disciplinary processes highlights the importance of principals and Boards clarifying the linkages, connections and distinctions between the earlier mentioned micro-processes in performance management generally. Such linkages need to also be clarified in policy development for each micro-process.

### **Clarity**

The latter statement suggests that clarity in guidelines and criteria for all performance management micro-processes is crucial if staff are to understand how to implement policy effectively. NZ now has appraisal criteria established in the nationally mandated guidelines, however individual schools have some flexibility in the way that they adopt processes to meet the guidelines. It is clear from the findings cited in this author's research that the process should be developed with a genuine intent for improvement and not check-listing alone. The process should also be well publicised in the school and explicitly detailed.

### **Quality Time**

Making and taking enough time to carry out appraisal was considered by participants in all three studies cited as crucial to effectiveness. The following quote from an appraiser (in the evaluation of the short-term training) concerning what makes appraisal effective supports this:

Time - use class time - counterproductive; use staff time - resentment - already under stress; that is a problem - any solutions? (Piggot-Irvine, 2001:143)

There is an implication from all of the findings that management (particularly middle managers as the key implementers) must be given time and support to implement appraisal. Where appraisal is working well for example, it is often because management has accorded it priority in the plethora of management tasks that occur in schools and middle managers have time allocation to carry it out. It is also apparent that, in these schools, the senior managers themselves fully engage in their own appraisal, that is, they model that it is worthy of a high priority in their time management.

How can time be provided in a context as frantic as that in schools? There are multiple ways that time for appraisal was allocated in the schools associated with the three studies cited in this paper. Several schools gained consent to open one hour later, two times a term, to allow for appraisal interactions to occur. Other schools used specified teacher only days for appraisal. Others still recognised that appraisal is too important an activity to squeeze into a free period during the school day and they made use of time before and after the timetabled day to conduct the process. Ultimately however until the issue of overload is addressed and managers are given time to manage appraisal then we will continue to see not only highly stressed staff in schools but also poorly implemented approaches.

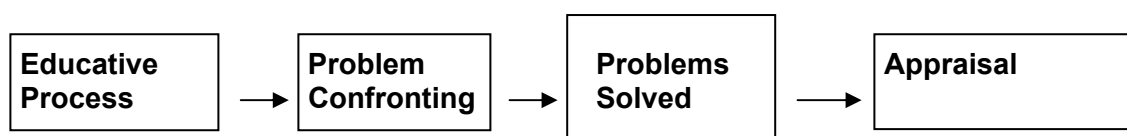
### **Developing Educative Interactions**

Respectful, trust-based and open relationships are at the core of appraisal effectiveness, as one of the appraisees in the long-term evaluation study reported “The trust issue is the most important” (Piggot-Irvine, 2001:259).

Good interpersonal interactions generally are often noted as important but elaboration beyond such broad statements is rare in the general appraisal literature. It is the more specific literature on productive reasoning (Argyris, 1985, 1990) that led this author to conclude that openness and trust could only be established if appraisers and appraisees created what has been described earlier as an “educative process”. An educative relationship is based on bilateralism (shared control, shared thinking, shared evidence, shared planning and monitoring) leading to appraisers having more confidence to help appraisees to confront and resolve problems if they arise.

The educative process is not merely the sort of good listening and questioning skills type interpersonal interactions that several authors nominate as being important for appraisal (see Edwards, 1992; Immegart, 1994; Marshall, 1995; and Middlewood, 1997). An educative process is situated at a deeper, problem-confronting, level. Such a process, in turn, can create high trust, shared (bilateral) rather than hierarchical control, and therefore an open relationship. Such an open, bilateral, relationship should enhance the potential for problems to be confronted rather than avoided. The confronting of problems, in turn, should lead to problems being solved. Problems solved should mean that appraisal has improvement outcomes for learning, teaching and management. This causal link is shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Causal link diagram of appraisal effectiveness**



## **Effectiveness**

The dearth of literature on how to help appraisers develop the sort of educative, problem-resolving, interactions in appraisal, is indicative of the extent to which this is overlooked and perhaps even avoided because it is in the “too hard” basket. The following quote from an appraiser in the short-term training evaluation study underscores that appraisal is not only hard but other complex issues also impinge:

It's still an uncomfortable thing to do, especially with an average teacher or one who is out of their depth. It's an extra burden on an already over-abused group, the HoDs.

(Piggot-Irvine, 2001:137)

Helping appraisers to develop educative relationships should be an essential feature of all appraisal training. This author's research in the appraisal context indicates that such educative process training has to be in a different format to that of the standard one to two day block allocation which was used for initial appraisal training in NZ schools.

## **Training**

An implication from the findings of the studies noted is that school management must re-think their approach to training for appraisal so that it goes beyond the quick-fix, one day (or even shorter), approach. It is recommended that the training includes a coverage of all elements of appraisal such as values, purposes, objective setting, observation skills, data-gathering skills, interviewing and report writing. The training should also focus on helping appraisers to develop an educative process. A suggested approach for this could include that the principles and content:

- focus on personalised actionable knowledge (Argyris, 1993), where individuals are helped to examine their own actions and to take responsibility for both detecting and correcting defensiveness associated with interactions;
- should help appraisers to expose the gap between their espousals and actions. This exposure must also involve challenge and critique and be based on objective evidence that the appraiser can reflect on;
- must introduce appraisers to effective models for interacting in bilateral, open, non-defensive and problem confronting ways. Regardless of the model chosen, it must be presented at a level that is both simple and concise, “yet its complexity must not be underplayed” (Cardno, 1994:237);
- must engage participants in taking this model from a level of espousal (thinking or beliefs) to implementation; and
- must be followed-up by intensive, on-going practice. The follow-up may be best designed in a series of spaced (say one to two months) sessions of approximately four hour duration over at least a year. This spacing, or “time-lapsed learning” as Cardno (1994:240) describes it, allows participants to assimilate and internalise their new learning.

The following quote from one of the participants involved in the evaluation of the longer-term, action research based approach to training, underscores the complexity and intensity associated with helping appraisers to appropriately establish an educative process with staff.

Our senior management team initially attended a 2 day “Positively Dealing with Conflict” course with Eileen, following an earlier year long management contract ...but it wasn't until Eileen came in to do an evaluation of my performance that the reality of the extent of my avoidance and controlling strategies when dealing with staff problems became painfully clear.

I was totally devastated! ... I guess the really depressing part of it all was that I really believed that the way that I was dealing with staff issues was okay. The sudden realisation that I wasn't really shattered the idealistic view I had of myself. After four days of intensive reflection, self-doubt, and self-loathing, I returned to the school feeling very scared. I was also really determined to deal with these problems I had.

Eileen and I then began some intensive reflection on the reasons for my behaviours. She got me to re-read all of the material we had covered in workshops (my Christmas holiday task!). She asked me to draw up a set of criteria for analysing my implementation of appraisal. All of this has led to Eileen and I now constantly re-examining the way that I manage and appraise staff. I am recording the interactions. We then critique this against my summarised criteria, and I re-practise more effective ways of interacting. I am focusing on developing shared control, and genuine openness to learning with staff.

(Piggot-Irvine, 2001b:11)

This account reveals that substantially more than short-term training is required to help appraisers to develop educative process interactions with appraisees.

### **Creating Respect, Openness and Trust Generally**

The final feature of effective appraisal overlaps with earlier mentioned features. The link between appraisal effectiveness and on-going educative relationships cannot be ignored. The findings in each of the studies cited reveals that respect, openness and trust need to be established through honest interactions in all situations - not just that of appraisal, but in every interaction at every level of the school.

### **Conclusion**

The development of an approach to appraisal that has the key features of effectiveness described in this paper begins with an understanding of the location and integration of appraisal in the wider context of performance management. Underpinning the approach are values linked to objectivity, fairness, honesty, openness, transparency, respect, trust and non-defensiveness. These values, however, cannot just be "turned on" for appraisal. For appraisal to be effective the process must be embedded in a wider culture where the values form part of the fabric of the everyday life of the school. Most importantly the values need to be modelled from the top down. That is an ultimate challenge for all school leaders and governors.

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