How bosses can best eliminate self-interest in staff evaluations

Rating

Research shows that when there is no risk of a lie being discovered, people will tell the truth only 39 per cent of the time. PHOTO | FILE

By SCOTT BELLOWS

Posted Wednesday, February 24 2016 at 18:45

In Summary

- Recent research shows that supervisors lie more than 33 per cent of the time in their staff appraisals.

Humans crave fairness. We desire our actions to speak for themselves without any bias. If our own individual innovation at our workplace results in a significant improvement at our firm, then we expect to gain recognition from it and share in the profit.

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We loathe when others misrepresent our work or profit from us without partaking.

Further, nothing reflects employee angst more in an organisation than the ubiquitous annual performance review.

Despite Business Talk discussing the negative effects and demotivation of evaluations on 12 July 2013 along with other research in many publications, the practice still flourishes throughout Kenyan firms.

Notwithstanding the anxiety that slows down work and the unconscious bias of supervisors, research conducted by Julie Rosaza and Marie Claire Villeval at the University of Montpellier and the University of Lyon in France show yet another startling trend during performance reviews.

Managers actually lie. Supervisors do not just record little simple fictitious statements that slightly exaggerate or understate an employee's performance.

Managers out and out lie with stunning depth and frequency. The researchers found that bosses lie more than 33 per cent of the time on employee performance reviews.

Research conducted by Sip, Roepstorff, McGregor, and Frith shows that honesty exists as a fundamental underpinning of human behaviour and society. However, lying behaviour often presents a challenge to catch.

Employees widely suspect their management of lying in a multitude of situations. Audit firm Ernst & Young published a European Fraud Survey in 2009 that found that 40 per cent of staff across many companies thought that their executives lacked integrity to the extent that in tough times, the management would cut corners, with 30 per cent of respondents strongly agreeing.

However, if researchers ask employees directly whether they themselves exhibit dishonest behaviour, vast majorities of respondents across studies show self-bias by stating they do not lie or cut corners.

Since self reporting on honesty does not work, social scientists must dig deeper. Research that Urs Fischbacher and Franziska Heusi undertook delineated that when no risk of anyone discovering a lie exists, people will tell the truth only 39 per cent of the time and 22 per cent will state utter complete total lies.

Interestingly, the remaining 39 per cent comprises incomplete lies whereby people change only some of the details.

So we could classify people's honesty into three categories: authentic truth, twisted truth, or dark evil lies. Multiple other researchers in the past five years delve into understanding human truthfulness behaviour in the workplace.

Annual performance

The research puts perspective on what employees often feel when receiving their evaluations. When one out of three statements on reviews represents a manager lie, the falsehoods by managers actually mimic those in the general population falling between twisted truth and dark evil lies.

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So, examine the following situation and decide your action points as a prospective auditor. Ntaiya works as a teacher in a secondary school near Nakuru.

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He performs well, always arrives to work on time, contributes to duties above and beyond his job description, and displays a pleasant positive disposition.

However, the school's principal regularly rates Ntaiya lower than other teachers during the annual performance review.

Despite the relative comfort and job security of employment within the government of Kenya's school system, Ntaiya quit and transferred to a nearby private school making slightly less money, but felt he would receive greater workplace satisfaction and less conflict.

If you were an efficiency or organisational behaviour auditor working on behalf of the Teacher Service Commission (TSC), what would you look out for in order to discover, mitigate the likelihood, and prevent Ntaiya's situation from occurring with future employees of the school.

First, start with an understanding of some of the methods that researchers utilise to catch liars.

Researchers create controlled situations in workplaces where supervisors and employees interact and complete duties while afterwards the managers report staff performance following the tasks.

Unknowingly, the researchers watch the scenarios and know the employees' actual performance. The dark evil lies told by supervisors usually results in benefiting them financially or with recognition or advancement.

The twisted truth with only incomplete lies told by managers usually enhances both personal gains for themselves as well as gains to the employee, such as departmental team rewards.

So, how could you in your workplace or a TSC auditor eliminate self-interest from your supervisors' agendas?

Research from Harvard Business School professor Max Bazerman shows that managers should not provide multitudes of goals to employees, but rather gives broad thematic goals.

Then keep track of goal progress transparently and intermitted throughout the year with employees gaining access to the tally all along to ensure fairness.

Researcher Samuel Culbert advocates for performance coaching where quarterly or monthly interaction between supervisor and staff changes the affair to how to improve at work and in their careers rather than punitive disruptive performance reviews.

Additionally, while most serious organisations include an internal auditor among their ranks, usually such firms limit their scope to financial transactions and policies rather than expanding the auditor's work to include implementation and bias investigations.

Finally, while most professionals know about 360 evaluations conducted on every employee, few firms actually implement them.