

## Watch for cultural biases in assessing employees

*Differences in power structure and expectations make appraisals tricky*

BY RHONDA SINGER

It's no secret. In the next decade, Canadian organizations are going to have to increasingly turn to immigrants as the supply of workers dries up in Canada. This demographic shift is going to pose some unique challenges for organizations in integrating these new Canadians into the workplace, particularly when it comes to performance reviews.

Values, beliefs and perspectives vary by country of origin. Typical group and individual behaviours in countries such as Canada and the United States are not commonly seen or understood by people from other cultures.

The performance appraisal, with its goal-setting procedures and inherent feedback process, is a western concept that can be a cultural disconnect with individuals from some countries. In Asian corporations an employee's appraisal (and their prospects for promotion) is as likely to deal with attributes such as co-operation and sociability as achievement of results. And, because status within these cultures is so crucial to an individual's sense of worth and contribution, it is important to navigate this cultural minefield with sensitivity so the employee does not become insulted or lose face.

Differences in values and behaviours, influenced by culture, can make performance appraisals tricky for everyone involved. Two main differences managers need to

be on the look out for are power distance and individualism versus collectivism.

### Power distance

Power distance is a measure of hierarchy and the extent to which a society accepts the unequal distribution of power. In highly hierarchical countries, such as China and India, managers provide explicit directions and employees are far more deferential to their superiors than in more participative or low power countries like Canada.

Employees from low power countries seek new responsibilities as a way to achieve promotion. In contrast, in higher power countries, initiative is seen only at the most senior level, while the employee performs current tasks with great care. For them, improving their technical expertise is the proven path to promotion.

Pinoo Bindhani, director of market development at Toronto-based Career Edge Organization, a non-profit group that offers internships for internationally qualified professionals through its Career Bridge program, said managers working with internationally educated professionals often experience these perceptual problems. Online training programs to help educate both immigrants and employers on these subtle differences are offered by Career Edge to both its own employees and the organizations that hire internationally educated professionals to ensure performance appraisals consider

these cultural differences.

### Individualism versus collectivism

In individualistic cultures, such as Canada and the U.S., individual effort is recognized and rewarded. However, in collectivist cultures, such as Pakistan, recognition and rewards are normally assigned for strong group performance. The individual is expected to work for the good of the group.

At Procter and Gamble Canada, a Toronto-based consumer product manufacturer with 4,000 employees, workers receive considerable training in diversity in order to recognize such differences and increase productivity and business in its multicultural workforce, says Jane Lewis, the company's HR director.

Procter and Gamble demonstrates a strong leadership commitment to diversity, which is necessary to succeed with a multicultural workforce, she says.

"We believe that diverse organizations outperform homogeneous organizations," says Lewis. "We communicate that belief throughout the company in a variety of ways, including support for affinity groups, their customs and the celebration of non-western holidays."

Lewis adds that Procter and Gamble is aware that the western practice of performance appraisals is a disconnect for people from other cultures. Therefore it's important to train managers to help them create appraisals where clearly defined expectations are linked with performance mea-

sures. Then this process needs to be clearly communicated to all employees, especially those from different cultures.

The performance appraisal system is a key element of Procter and Gamble's management program, says Lewis. Known as a "Work and Development Plan," the appraisal system aims to strengthen a manager's capabilities. The company uses various assessment tools to gauge progress. A quality audit of all appraisals is conducted to ensure the desired results are achieved.

Performance appraisals shouldn't be a once-a-year process. While an annual performance appraisal is a useful tool for management and employees, it is worthwhile to manage employees' goals throughout the year to encourage two-way communication on an ongoing basis, says Career Edge's Bindhani.

A coach guide and an intern guide help Career Edge's clients successfully complete the goal management process. The intern guide provides a clear framework for how appraisals are conducted, thus clarifying expectations for all involved.

Cultural diversity in the workplace provides an opportunity to maximize sales and profits while creating a work atmosphere appropriate for all cultures. Managers and executives in an economy becoming more dependent on the successful integration of highly skilled internationally trained professionals owe it to their organizations — and their futures as business leaders — to successfully manage the entire diverse workforce.

*Rhonda Singer is president of Progress Career Planning Institute, which offers organizations and individuals consulting and training services in career planning and cultural intelligence. She can be reached at [singer@careerplan.net](mailto:singer@careerplan.net) and [www.pcp.ca](http://www.pcp.ca).*