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A RESEARCH & APPLICATIONS JOURNAL

The Negotiated Performance Appraisal Model: Enhancing Supervisor-Subordinate Communication and Conflict Resolution

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the Negotiated Performance Appraisal (NPA) model, a facilitated performance appraisal process designed to enhance supervisor-subordinate dialogue. It was first applied in Uganda in 1996, and has served to improve hierarchical communication within organizations. This article is directed towards facilitators involved in organizational development, as well as organizational consultants and workplace mediators. Supervisors are often hesitant to share their true feelings—both positive and negative—with subordinates. Subordinates, in turn, are apt to feel unduly judged by their supervisors and frustrated with their jobs. Traditional performance appraisals have long been criticized for not helping to promote effective dialogue. The strength of the NPA model lies in its structure, which encourages candid two-way conversation about past, present, and future performance. It is precisely this candid conversation that extends the usefulness of the NPA beyond performance appraisal, as an alternate mediation model for supervisor-subordinate disputes.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The feedback and communication of performance between people in the workplace is a crucial and often challenging area for many organizations. Formal performance appraisal processes can also present triggering experiences for those involved, particularly if inappropriately structured or if the process is poorly managed. Creating facilitated options is a powerful contribution that group facilitators can provide, which can turn such situations around and improve an organization's internal culture. This article builds on Gregorio Billikopf's *Contributions of Caucusing and Pre-Caucusing to Mediation* published in the 2002 issue of *Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal,* and offers a useful mediated performance process model for performance appraisal.
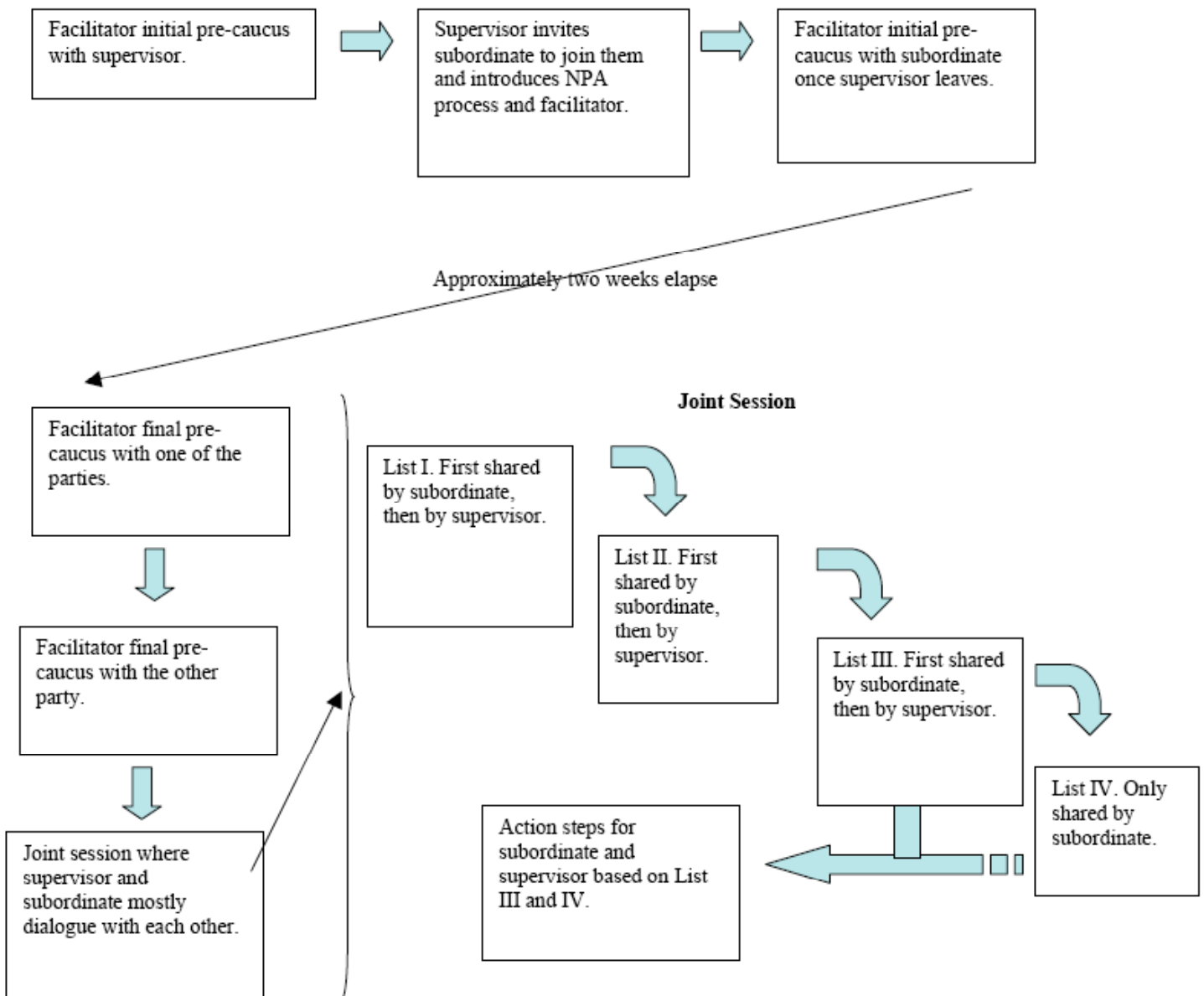
KEYWORDS

Facilitated performance appraisal, negotiated performance appraisal, mediation, conflict management, power differential, supervisor-subordinate conflict

Introduction

In 1996, I traveled to Kampala, Uganda as an organizational consultant for US-AID, on behalf of the University of California, USA. The executive of the host enterprise wished to improve communications with his three top managers. It was during this visit that I developed the Negotiated Performance Appraisal (NPA) model.

The conversations between the executive and the top mangers were so positive, that I began to apply the same approach in my work with organizations in California and in Chile. Over the years, I have had the opportunity to repeatedly test and refine the NPA model, both in and out of agriculture, and train organizational consultants who use it on a regular basis.

Figure 1. Overview of the NPA process

Facilitator initial pre-caucus with supervisor.

Supervisor invites subordinate to join them and introduces NPA process and facilitator.

Facilitator initial pre-caucus with subordinate once supervisor leaves.

Approximately two weeks elapse

Facilitator final pre-caucus with one of the parties.

Facilitator final pre-caucus with the other party.

Joint session where supervisor and subordinate mostly dialogue with each other.

Joint Session

List I. First shared by subordinate, then by supervisor.

List II. First shared by subordinate, then by supervisor.

List III. First shared by subordinate, then by supervisor.

List IV. Only shared by subordinate.

Action steps for subordinate and supervisor based on List III and IV.

Briefly, the NPA (Figure 1) consists of supervisor and subordinate completing several lists mostly focused on the *subordinate's* performance. That is, (1) what the subordinate does well, (2) areas the subordinate has improved in, and (3) what the subordinate still needs to improve on. The subordinate also creates a fourth list, based on the questions posed by his or her supervisor: "What can I do differently, as your supervisor, so you can excel in this job." A facilitator plays a major role in helping the parties prepare and refine these lists in a pre-caucus, (Billikopf, 2002, 2009) or separate meeting, with each individual. These pre-caucuses are at the heart of the NPA. Much of the work of the facilitator is done in these preliminary meetings, such as preparing the parties to present their perspectives in a clear fashion that enhances dialogue and reduces defensiveness. In the joint session, however, the parties mainly address each other and do so with hardly any facilitator interference.

The NPA enhances dialogue and reduces interpersonal conflict between supervisors and subordinates, especially when a third party facilitator directs the process. Interpersonal conflict, often defined as a difference in opinion or point of view between individuals, can lead to creative, longer lasting solutions. Contention is often the consequence of poorly managed conflicts. The NPA model can help supervisors and subordinates work through problems before they turn into feelings of contention. In those situations where there is contention between supervisors and subordinates, the NPA can be effectively utilized as an alternate mediation model.

The NPA process is essentially the same whether is it used strictly as a performance appraisal tool, or as an approach to mediation. There are a few vital changes that need to be incorporated when it is used as a mediation tool. As a result, the bulk of this paper will address the NPA as an appraisal tool. The few modifications required in order to use the approach for mediating supervisor-subordinate disputes are addressed in a brief sub-section at the end of the paper. Finally, the NPA permits effective dialogue in multicultural and multiethnic settings because of its emphasis on helping the other party save face (i.e., retain dignity by speaking in ways that reduce embarrassment and defensiveness).

The NPA as a Performance Appraisal Tool

An important tool available for supervisors to provide feedback to employees on their performance is the performance appraisal. Contemporary literature suggests that performance appraisals often fail to deliver on their potential for enhancing supervisor-subordinate communication.

When there is little dialogue, people often make incorrect assumptions about how they are viewed by others. These misunderstandings may be particularly serious in supervisor-subordinate relations. When supervisors fail to communicate affect, or make it clear they have listened, employees begin to worry: "They often assume the worst—that their ideas, feelings, and input were disregarded or dismissed—and this triggers a destructive combination of mistrust and a sense of powerlessness and resentment" (Cooper & Sawaf, 1998, p. 60). Lack of communication about an employee's performance leads to mistrust, defensiveness and conflict (Gibson & Cohen, 2003).

Supervisors sometimes think they are communicating, or that subordinates should be able to pick up on their subtle hints. In part, such an approach is born of a desire to avoid confrontation (Kimsey, McKinney, Della Noce & Trobaugh, 2005). In the end, avoidance increases feelings of mistrust and contention (Gibson & Cohen, 2003).

Uncertainty as to How to Provide Feedback

Despite the potential that feedback has to increase productivity (Crowell, Anderson, Abel & Sergio, 1988; Luthans & Stajkovic, 1999), supervisors often find it difficult to provide casual day-to-day feedback, or participate in more formal performance appraisals (Alexander, 2006).

Negative or neutral feedback. It has been found that employees who have been rated as "satisfactory" or "average" tend to reduce their performance levels (Pearce & Porter, 1996). No wonder supervisors feel uneasy about telling employees they are not doing well. Artificially inflating employee ratings is not the solution either: "As with olives, where a small olive may be graded 'large' and the largest 'super' or 'colossal,' the worst rating many companies give their employees on appraisals is 'good.' Thus, the employer might be in the position of arguing [in court] that 'good' actually means 'bad'" (Schlei & Grossman, 1983). Overstated appraisals, furthermore, do not increase performance and do more harm than good (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs, 2003; Swann, 1996).

Positive feedback. While supervisors' trepidation to give constructive criticism is understandable, some supervisors also find it difficult to praise subordinates. Common explanations given by managers for avoiding praise of subordinates include:

1) Fear of complacency—that subordinates will think they have little else to improve on, or will even reduce their efforts (Jenkins, 2006; Ryan, 2007)

2) Fear that subordinates will ask for a raise (Ryan, 2007)

3) Not feeling comfortable giving praise—or a sentiment that a supervisor *should not have to* give praise (Wysocki & Kepner, 2008)

In contrast to other types of rewards, positive feedback is not expensive: "delivery of verbal praise… can be bestowed on a limitless number of targets without resource depletion" (Biernat, 2003, p. 1024). Potential detriments of giving praise are exacerbated when acclaim is not balanced with constructive criticism (Ryan, 2007). Being able to receive constructive criticism is vital to employees and also correlates with improved performance (Bachrach, Bendoly, & Podsakoff, 2001; Tuckey, Brewer, & Barnes, 2006).

Performance appraisals. In contrast to day-to-day feedback, the performance appraisal provides an opportunity for in-depth dialogue. Yet performance appraisals are often considered among the most dreaded supervisorial activity as supervisors are placed in a position to pass judgment on subordinates (Billikopf, 2009). Certainly, the debate about the worth of performance appraisals has been raging for decades (McGregor, 1957), and continues to this day (Culbert, 2008). Along with death and taxes, performance appraisals have been listed among life's most unpleasant experiences (Holcomb, 2006). They have also been described as a "deadly disease" by often-quoted Edwards Deming (Aluri & Reichel, 1994; Milkovich & Boudreau, 1994). Moreover, traditional performance appraisals tend to be adversarial in nature (Folger, Konovsky & Cropanzano, 1992, p. 169).

The use of the performance appraisal to make pay decisions has been greatly contested (Cleveland, Murphy & Williams, 1989; Meyer, Kay & French, 1965). When the same performance appraisal is used to both give feedback and to make pay decisions, questions of rater-reliability and leniency are raised (Jawahar & Stone, 1997), and there are concerns that employee defensiveness is augmented (Meyer, Kay & French, 1965). Murphy and Williams (1989) thus make the case for using different appraisals for providing employee performance feedback from those used to make salary decisions.

Towards a more effective performance appraisal

In the literature, there are specific suggestions that would increase the efficacy of the performance appraisal process.

1) Employ separate appraisals to make pay decisions from those used to develop goals or provide feedback (Cleveland, Murphy & Williams, 1989; Jawahar & Stone, 1997; Meyer, Kay & French, 1965; Murphy and Williams, 1989; Ryan, 2007).

2) Objectives and standards should be transparent to subordinates (Folger, Konovsy and Cropanzano, 1992).

3) Objectives and standards ought to be communicated to subordinates long before they are evaluated (Folger, Konovsy and Cropanzano, 1992).

4) Subordinates need to have a hand in developing or—at the very least—challenging objectives and standards (Folger, Konovsy and Cropanzano, 1992).

5) Supervisors should be able to provide sincere feedback (Alexander, 2006; Amah, 2008; Cooper & Sawaf, 1998, p. 60; Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Kimsey, McKinney, Della Noce & Trobaugh, 2005), whether it is praise (Biernat, 2003; Crowell, Anderson, Abel & Sergio, 1988) or constructive criticism (Bachrach, Bendoly, & Podsakoff, 2001; Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs, 2003; Pearce & Porter, 1996; Ryan, 2007; Tuckey, Brewer, & Barnes, 2006; Schlei & Grossman, 1983; Swann, 1996).

6) Subordinates should not become defensive when receiving constructive criticism, nor complacent when hearing commendations, but rather see the appraisal as an opportunity to discuss future improvement (Jenkins, J., 2006; Ryan, L, 2007).

7) Supervisors would benefit from coaching on how to provide effective praise and speak of needed improvement (Wysocki & Kepner, 2008).

8) Supervisors ought to understand issues revolving around rater-reliability (Jawahar & Stone, 1997).

9) Subordinates should have input in the process and not have to rely on external judgments alone (Alexander, 2006; Folger, Konovsy and Cropanzano, 1992).

10) Supervisor-subordinate dialogue ought to be fostered (Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Kimsey, McKinney, Della Noce & Trobaugh, 2005).

11) Supervisors need to be well acquainted with the performance of subordinates (Folger, Konovsy and Cropanzano, 1992).

12) Issues of saving face (including preservation of supervisorial organizational power), intercultural, interethnic, and gender differences need to be considered (Chen & Starosta, 1997; Jawahar & Stone, 1997; Tannen, 2007; Ting-Toomey, 1999).

The NPA Model as an Effective Performance Appraisal Tool

The objectives of the NPA coincide well with the twelve specifications just enumerated. The bracketed numbers that follow correspond to how these suggestions fit into the NPA:

The NPA aims to enhance dialogue and communication [10] between supervisor and subordinate (i.e., talk about difficult matters that may often be neglected [5, 6, 10]), and develop and

clarify future performance expectations [2]. No pay decision is made during the NPA [1], but rather, subordinate and supervisor [4, 9] come to an agreement on how the subordinate's performance can improve, through specific achievement milestones, to meet valued organizational needs—and thus be more likely to obtain a raise or promotion when these are considered [1, 3]. Supervisors are coached by the facilitator [7, 8] and encouraged to pay careful attention to the details of an employee's performance [11]. The NPA process also pays special consideration to helping parties save face, maintain dignity, and reduce defensiveness [12].

General Overview of NPA

Some organizations where I have introduced the facilitated NPA now use a modified approach without a facilitator. Research is needed to compare the results of more traditional approaches with both the facilitated NPA and the NPA that is carried out without a facilitator. Observations in the field, based on my work and that of others implementing the NPA model, leads me to believe that the facilitator plays a key role in the successful execution of the NPA. Future research will be needed to test this hypothesis.

Let us look at some of the NPA model specifics in more detail. In the NPA process, the supervisor will create three lists and the subordinate, four. The first three lists, separately produced by both supervisor and subordinate, have to do strictly with the *subordinate's* performance:

List I. Performance areas in which the subordinate *does well*

List II. Performance areas in which the subordinate has *recently improved*

List III. Performance areas in which the subordinate still *needs improvement*

So, for List I, the supervisor would focus on what the *subordinate* does well. In creating his or her List I, the subordinate likewise focuses on his or her own positive performance. The same approach is taken for lists II and III. In addition, there is a fourth list that is *only* produced by the subordinate. List IV is completed by the subordinate based on a question posed by the supervisor:

List IV. "What can I do differently, as your supervisor, so you can excel in your job?"

While there are a number of approaches to having the parties fill out these lists and go through the NPA process, I present one that has served me well.

Initial pre-caucus between the facilitator and supervisor. Ideally, this meeting takes place at least two weeks ahead of the joint session. The facilitator will coach the supervisor on such matters as: carefully listening to subordinates; separating praise from constructive criticism; providing compelling praise (details given below); encouraging subordinates to talk about shortcomings, as well as the reasons behind dysfunctional behaviors exhibited; providing additional constructive feedback not raised by subordinates; permitting subordinates an active role in developing strategies for improved performance; evaluating potential plans and objectives; explaining to subordinates how NPA goals and associated timetables for completion will affect future salary determinations (and decisions about promotions); recognizing subordinate signs of stress that indicate unmet needs; and introducing other interpersonal negotiation skills as needed [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12].

Rather than going into detail on every one of these points, I have chosen a single area—having facilitators coach supervisors on offering compelling praise when presenting List I. (For additional points and suggestions, interested facilitators can download a complimentary copy of the book *Party-Directed Mediation: Helping Others Resolve Differences* as well as video clips of NPA sessions at http://www.cnr.berkeley.edu/ucce50/ag-labor/7conflict/, Billikopf, 2010).

Facilitators help supervisors understand that their praise is at times contaminated with negative comments. Once in the joint session, any coaching from the facilitator on how to word praise would diminish its strength. Facilitators will explain, for instance, that positive acclaim varies widely, from mere thanks for a job well done, to *compelling* praise. Subordinates seem to be transformed by the latter. One top manager, who was the recipient of such praise from the owner, emotionally explained: "I have never received such nice, touching comments in all of my life." After a pause she added, "And I also realize, that I have not provided this type of encouragement to my own subordinates, either."

Some of the key characteristics for giving compelling praise include *labeling* the positive behavior, explaining how the subordinate's behavior has a *positive impact* on the organization or on individuals, and providing a couple of concrete examples of critical incidents where this behavior made a positive difference. Such praise should not contaminated by negative insinuations. Here is an abbreviated example of such praise:

"I really value *initiative*. To me, it means that others have taken upon themselves the responsibility for *noticing* what needs to be done without being asked. It makes my own job more enjoyable, as I feel there is a backup system. In the long run mistakes are reduced. It improves the bottom line, too. David, *you* are such a person; *you* show initiative. For instance, yesterday you noticed

we had not finished preparations for our big event next month, so you made a few calls, and then left all the information on my desk so I could make an informed decision. Three weeks ago, when I was out of the office you…"

Even supervisors who are reticent about giving compelling praise are more likely to do so when they can see the larger context, and understand that there will also be dialogue about needed subordinate improvement; they recognize that subordinates will come to understand what is required of them if they wish to receive a raise or promotion [1, 2, 3]; and comprehend how powerful this praise can be [5, 6, 7, 12]. The supervisor is also coached on how to complete List II and III.

Following this pre-caucus, the subordinate is invited to join the supervisor and facilitator for a few moments. Before doing so, the facilitator coaches the supervisor on how to introduce the NPA to the subordinate. Having the supervisor, rather than the facilitator, give this overview of the NPA underscores the role of the third party as a process facilitator who is there to promote effective supervisor-subordinate dialogue [10] without usurping the supervisor's power [12]. Furthermore, the subordinate is likely to give the process more weight. By having the supervisor role-play the introduction, the facilitator can gain confidence that the stage is properly set for the subordinate's pre-caucus.

So, the supervisor, after inviting the subordinate, Ellen, into the conference room, may say something like: "Hello Ellen. We will be carrying out a new type of performance appraisal this year. I am asking you to complete three lists: which areas you do well in, which areas you have recently improved in (say in the last six to eight months), and which areas you might still be able to improve in. I will do the same, and create the same three lists, that is, what I feel you do well, where you have improved recently, and where you can still improve. I am also asking you to complete a fourth list, in response to this question: 'Ellen, what can I do differently, as your supervisor, so you can excel in your job?' Now, I am sure you will have lots of questions about this process. I will now leave you with the facilitator who will answer your questions about the process, and they will also help you get started with your lists and prepare for the joint session we will have in two weeks." The supervisor then leaves the facilitator with the subordinate.

Pre-caucus with the subordinate. Here, the facilitator coaches the subordinate on how to fill out and present his or her four lists [9]. Through effective questions, the facilitator helps the subordinate place items in each list, and builds examples to help communicate each. The two most difficult lists for the subordinate to complete are List III and List IV. In List III the subordinate speaks about areas he or she needs to improve. Some subordinates find it difficult to *talk* about these weaknesses. Nevertheless, subordinates usually prefer to bring up weaknesses first, as a face saving measure, when they realize

that their supervisor will also talk about them [Billikopf, 2009]. When a subordinate is reticent about listing weaknesses, the facilitator may ask him or her to think of weaknesses that may possibly be raised by the supervisor.

It is not sufficient for the subordinates to simply list areas of potential improvement. Instead, for every area mentioned, it is fundamental that the subordinate be ready to propose specific plans and timetables for turning these weaknesses into strengths. The facilitator plays a significant role in helping subordinates propose or develop viable plans that can be presented during the joint session [9]. For instance, a subordinate would not only say that he needs to improve his oral presentation skills, but outline the approach he will take to do so. This may include joining a speech club, taking a class on public speaking, videotaping his presentations for analysis and review, working with an experienced mentor, and so on. A subordinate who is thorough in preparing an outline of his or her areas of weakness, and proposes viable plans for improvement, will not require additional criticism from the supervisor.

List IV is the other difficult list for subordinates to articulate. It is hard for many subordinates to find the right words to explain what changes their supervisor can make. The facilitator helps the subordinate frame frustrations as positive suggestions that will not offend [10, 12]. For instance, a subordinate may feel that her subordinate is *intimidating* and *unapproachable*. The facilitator helps the subordinate present these desired changes without using negative labels, but instead describing critical incidents.

Depending on scheduling needs, the facilitator can choose to do the bulk of the pre-caucusing with the parties during these initial pre-caucuses, or at a later date closer to the joint session. I find it helpful to ask the parties for at least one or two items from each list during an early pre-caucus. By doing so, the supervisor and subordinate have an idea on how to approach other issues that will come to their minds over the next couple of weeks.

The Joint Session between Supervisor and Subordinate

A vital role played by the facilitator during the joint session is helping subordinate and supervisor move past acknowledging challenges and weaknesses to creating workable plans for change. For instance, after a dialogue in which the subordinate explains how difficult it may be to interrupt the supervisor (from the earlier example regarding the 'intimidating' supervisor), the parties may agree to briefly meet twice a week, at specific times, to discuss issues of concern. They will also want to make provisions for other contingencies, such as dealing with more urgent matters.

The facilitator, however, tries to keep interruptions to a minimum during the joint session, and ensures that goals and

objectives are clear and specific, and watches for signs of stress among the parties. Parties that are well prepared through the pre-caucusing process will not need to be frequently interrupted [10].

Yet another role for the facilitator, during the exchange of lists, is to note the items from each of the parties' lists as they are read. If either party has forgotten to mention something mentioned during the pre-caucuses, the facilitator would make sure these are raised during the reading of the appropriate list. Because the facilitator does not want to draw attention to him or herself during the dialogue, one option is to type the issues—as they are raised in the joint session—onto a computer for projection at the proper time. Another is to do the same using flipchart paper that lays flat on the table, and that can be hung later.

Mechanics of the joint session. In the joint session, the supervisor and subordinate sit and face each other while the facilitator sits further away, based on the Party-Directed Mediation model (Billikopf, 2009). This seating arrangement underscores the fact that the dialogue is mostly between the supervisor and subordinate. In the absence of the pre-caucuses, this might be seen by the parties as a somewhat confrontational position. Instead, the parties feel empowered to talk directly to each other [10]. For a more detailed discussion of sitting mechanics see Billikopf, G. (2002). Contributions of Caucusing and Pre-Caucusing to Mediation. *Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal*, 4, 3-11. (Also see Billikopf, 2009.)

In the NPA, the exchange of lists follows a specific pattern. The supervisor introduces each list category but asks the subordinate to proceed first in reading or explaining his or her lists [12].

1) The subordinate reads his or her complete List I [9, 11]. When the subordinate shares his or her list, the supervisor only interrupts to ask for clarification, or to show signs of empathic listening that encourage the subordinate to expand on what he or she is saying.

2) The supervisor reads his or her complete List I, even if it means repeating much of what the subordinate has already mentioned. This process of both subordinate and supervisor sharing List I, as well as any related dialogue about what the subordinate does well, should continue for at least twenty minutes [5, 6].

3) Next, the subordinate reads his or her complete List II [9, 11].

4) The supervisor reads his or her complete List II, even if it means repeating much of what the subordinate has already mentioned [5, 6]. There is no minimum time that must elapse.

5) The subordinate reads his or her complete List III [9, 11].

6) After hearing the subordinate's List III, the supervisor is careful not to repeat and not to agree or disagree with what the subordinate has said. Instead, the supervisor may say something like: "Thanks so much for sharing your List III. I notice you put a lot of thought into it. Let me add a few items of my own to List III." When it comes to List III, then, the supervisor *only* mentions items that have *not* been brought up by the subordinate—including possible subordinate blind spots [5, 6, 12].

7) Each issue in List III is discussed—whether shared by the subordinate or the supervisor—with specific plans and dates for goal accomplishments being set [2, 3, 4, 9, 10]. To the degree possible, the subordinate takes the lead in suggesting plans to resolve weaknesses [10, 11]. These plans must meet the needs of the supervisor and the organization.

8) The subordinate reads his or her complete List IV [10].

9) The supervisor and subordinate make specific, workable plans, and arrange for evaluation of the same [10, 12].

10) The facilitator reads the list of agreements, timetables, and who has agreed to do what [10], and helps clarify follow-up needs that have been agreed on [10].

Facilitator Evaluation

In the process of training organizational facilitators and consultants on the NPA, I like to listen to recordings of their work. Figure 2 contains a list of items that, over the years, I have come to look for in a well carried out NPA.

Figure 2. Facilitator Evaluation Score Sheet for the Negotiated Performance Appraisal

Minimum passing score is 450 points of 500 (90%).

Preliminaries: (50 points)
The negotiated performance appraisal will be judged mostly from the recording of the joint session. The joint session will only be

successful if the pre-caucuses have been properly carried out. We will, however, score a few items from the pre-caucus. Did the facilitator ask the supervisor:

- If the perfect subordinate functioned at 100% capacity, at what capacity level does this subordinate function at? (10 points).
- Please attempt to explain how you have come to that percentage? (15 points)
- What specific changes would the subordinate have to make in order to improve his or her performance to ___% (15 points).
- Beside these questions, did the facilitator suggest to the supervisor that he or she should not be afraid to dream? (10 points).

Note: The items above should be discussed with the supervisor during the pre-caucus, when the subordinate is _not_ present. The following items are evaluated in regards to the joint session.

List I (150 points)

- Is it the supervisor—not the facilitator—who invites the subordinate to share List I? (5 points)
- In the process of praising the subordinate, the facilitator does not offer his or her praise, but rather adds weight to the praise given by the supervisor? (5 points)
- The supervisor explains why each item of praise is important? (15 points)
- The supervisor shows enthusiasm through expressions and tone of voice? (15 points)
- For every area of praise, the supervisor gives one or two specific examples? (30 points)
- The process of discussing List I lasted at least 20 minutes—including efforts made by the facilitator to have the supervisor summarize and expand? (55 points)
- Was negativity avoided during List I? (15 points)
- The supervisor repeated positive items brought up by the subordinate? (10 points)

List II (30 points)

- Is it the supervisor—not the facilitator—who invites the subordinate to share List II? (5 points)
- Were specific examples brought up? (5 points)
- If applicable, did the subordinate mention that some of the items listed here would also be listed under List III? (20 points)

List III (110 points)

- Is it the supervisor—not the facilitator—who invites the subordinate to share List III? (5 points)
- Does the supervisor thank the subordinate for reading List III _without_ agreeing or commenting on the substance of what the subordinate has said? (For instance, the supervisor may say something like: "Thanks for sharing your list. I can see you have put a lot of thought into it. Let me share mine.") (15 points)
- Was the methodology of creating a combined subordinate and supervisor List III followed, avoiding the process of _discussing_ items (OK to ask for clarification, however) in the list _before_ completing List III? (20 points)
- Was the subordinate permitted to choose the order of items to be tackled in List III when it was time to get into the substance of the list? (10 points)
- Did the subordinate arrive with one or two viable solutions to each issue he or she brought up in List III? (30 points)
- Was there a dialogue between the supervisor and the subordinate regarding points in List III? (30 points)

List IV (70 points)

- Is it the supervisor—not the facilitator—who invites the subordinate to share List IV? (5 points)
- Does the subordinate raise at least one substantive issue related to List IV? (15 points)
- Does the supervisor demonstrate a lack of defensiveness when the subordinate shares List IV? (For instance, by repeating what the subordinate has said regardless of whether he or she agrees with the same?) (20 points)
- Is there a dialogue between the supervisor and the subordinate regarding points raised in List IV? (30 points)

Final points (90 points)

- Have specific goals been agreed to? (30 points)
- Have supervisor and subordinate created a timetable for completing goals, including agreements of who will do what? (30 points)
- Are these goals related to the preliminary issues brought up in the supervisors pre-caucus? (15 points)
- Has a date been set for the facilitator to follow-up with the supervisor and subordinate? (15 points)

The NPA as an Alternate Mediation Model for Supervisor-Subordinate Disputes

Besides my work as an organizational consultant, I am also a scholar-practitioner in the area of organizational interpersonal mediation. An unintended offshoot of the NPA has been its use as an alternate mediation model for managing supervisor-subordinate disputes. Since readers of this journal are at times involved in mediation, and because the use of the NPA as a mediation model for supervisor-subordinate disputes does not require much additional elaboration, I include a few comments about the NPA in its mediation context.

The NPA process permits the supervisor, as well as the subordinate, to have a dialogue in a setting which preserves organizational power, and at the same time allows open discussion on critical issues that affect each of the parties. Because the approach, on the surface, focuses so much on issues of performance, this frames the dispute a bit more in terms of performance rather than a personality clash. Yet in the end, both types of issues are dealt with. The NPA is successful as a mediation tool, in part, because it permits *both* supervisor and subordinate to save face while speaking about the issues that really matter to each of them.

A typical scenario is a top manager who is dissatisfied with the performance of a middle manager. Feelings of contention may have developed between the two. The top manager is considering terminating this subordinate, yet realizes that the subordinate brings many valuable talents to the business. In one memorable instance, the top manager had employed a traditional mediator the previous year, to no avail. In each case, the middle supervisor involved had a major flaw such as poor relationship with his own subordinates, lack of follow-through, unwise spending, or some other issue. While in most instances the middle managers greatly improved, in at least one instance, the middle manager, despite an excellent conversation with his supervisor, decided to quit. The middle manager decided that he was not interested in making the changes that would be necessary to excel in the job. I believe that what was important was that they had the dialogue, and each could move forward with a better understanding of the other's needs and interests.

A facilitator who is using the NPA as an alternate mediation tool will want to be sensitive to the possible need to listen empathically, as one or the other party vents feelings of anger or frustration. A major difference, then, between an NPA carried out as a performance appraisal tool and one for supervisor-subordinate mediation, is the need for empathic listening required in the latter.

In those organizations where there is not a clear supervisorial role given to one of the disputing parties, it may be better to forego the supervisor's introduction of the NPA process; for instance, when the supervisor role is somewhat informal, when one of the parties has not been informed of the supervisory assignment, or, situations when an individual is permitted to delegate work to a subordinate but has little or no responsibility for evaluating the same (e.g., a school teacher delegating to a secretary). In these cases, there is a potential for some explosion and accusations being hurled during the brief meeting. The facilitator would probably have more success by not bringing the parties together until the final joint session.

Besides the use of empathic listening, the facilitator or mediator will want to pay careful attention to List I on the part of the supervisor, and make sure the subordinate also has something positive to say about the supervisor. When either party is not willing to say something positive about the other, it means they are not ready for a joint session. Instead, additional pre-caucuses may be needed (Billikopf, 2009). A complete discussion on the role of the facilitator as a listener and mediator in supervisor-subordinate disputes is included in the book, *Party-Directed Mediation* (Billikopf, 2010).

Finally, there may be times when the facilitator will be surprised by the negative affect expressed by one of the parties about the other during a pre-caucus. This may happen during a regular performance-appraisal-focused NPA. Once the facilitator recognizes this tension, he or she may focus on empathic listening. Only after the party feels heard will the facilitator concentrate on the NPA process.

Results

A dozen years of practical application of the NPA have yielded some fundamental lessons and observations. Specific research on several of these items would be beneficial:

1) The NPA model is particularly effective for the highest organizational levels, yet it functions well elsewhere.

2) Supervisors often begin by saying they are uncomfortable offering the type of compelling praise called for in the NPA

process (List I). As the facilitator explains the power of compelling praise, even the most reticent managers are frequently willing to push the limits of their comfort and provide such feedback.

3) Left to their own, most supervisors will finish the praise phase in less than five minutes. The facilitator will observe that it takes at least twenty minutes for the subordinate to relax and begin to absorb the positive comments.

4) When supervisors are successful in giving compelling praise, subordinates will often join in to make additional positive comments about their own work. When this happens, it is a sign of great success.

5) List II serves to recognize subordinate effort to make improvements in an area. Some of the items from List II may well be mentioned again in List III.

6) List III requires that specific goals and objectives, with a timetable, be developed. The NPA will be more successful when subordinates not only come ready to discuss their weaknesses, but also propose well-thought-out remedies for overcoming them.

7) Subordinates who may not have anything to include in List IV often add items to this list when they become aware of what is expected of them.

8) Role plays during the pre-caucuses are helpful and provide an adequate means of evaluating how well-prepared the parties are for the joint session.

9) The NPA tends to improve communications and solidify more positive interpersonal relations.

10) Behavioral changes are often observed immediately (the next day) after the NPA and tend to last.

11) Improved dialogue leads to improved performance, but not always. (See 13, below.)

12) There tends to be an increase in the giving of praise in organizations and thus a more positive organizational culture persists after the use of the NPA.

13) In some cases, the NPA uncovers incompatible interests and long-term goals between supervisors and subordinates. Those cross purposes existed anyway, but the NPA helps people make information-based decisions.

14) In cases where there existed poor functioning employees, the NPA has been successfully used as an alternative to employee discipline. Employees who would have been

otherwise terminated have turned around their performance and become valuable contributors. After the NPA however, discipline continues to be a managerial option. Lack of follow-up on agreed upon goals may also form part of the documentation needed to discipline or terminate employees.

In conclusion, the NPA is a tool that can be used by facilitators and organizational consultants to help enhance dialogue between supervisors and subordinates. The process is more effective when directed by a third party facilitator. The facilitator can help the supervisors and subordinates understand how to complete the required lists. Just as important, a facilitator can help the parties understand principles of interpersonal negotiation. Top among these are framing ideas so they will be given more consideration by the other party, and learning how to dialogue in ways that defensiveness is minimized. Those who have participated in the NPA process as supervisors or subordinates often feel it easier to continue to communicate even after the facilitator has left. Finally, with a few minor modifications, the NPA process can be an effective mediation approach for supervisor-subordinate disputes.

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