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Promises, Promises : Linking Meta-communication, Performance Appraisal and the Psychological Contract.

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Abstract :

Performance Appraisal (PA) within an organization involves management having individual meetings with employees. Literature identifies these are sometimes considered as 'difficult' due to employee reactions (Suddah 2013; Campeau 2012; Belew 2016 ; Ellis 2017 ; Weinstein 2016). This research explores the concept of metacommunication (Haden 2015; Fogel and Branco 1997) as a key factor influencing employee reactions, being driven by discussions with other people, within and external to the organisation. Reviewing existing PA literature has resulted in a conceptual model identifying the PA communication channels. Further to this, a model defining the web of meta-communication taking place around the PA process has been developed. It is purported that this web of metacommunication has a direct influence on employee reactions to their PA meeting when applied to the 'Pinch Crunch Model' (Sherwood & Glidewell 1973). Knowledge gained from this research will positively impact on the employee/er relationship by understanding the importance of management promises.

The phenomena being explored is the influence of metacommunication (Haden 2015; Fogel and Branco 2014),in the context of employees talking to others about the performance appraisal (PA) meeting. More specifically, the influence of metacommunication (MC) on employee expectations and reactions in connection to the Performance Appraisal (PA) process.

Performance Appraisal (PA)

In order to understand where PA is now, it is important to understand the origins of the PA. The performance appraisal dates back to the industrial revolution (Bracken et al 2001; Kampkötter (2016) and was aimed at addressing performance and productivity issues within production environments. Times have changed since then, so too the importance of employee relationships, management styles, especially in understanding the importance of employee engagement. The PA process itself has not undergone tremendous changes and literature presents that the process is much the same as when it originated (Heywood and Brown 2005). The model (Fig 1) supports the literature where the PA as a structured organisational HR process (Weinstein 2016) however, does not support the existing continuous circular flow of the PA(Fig 2) within HR literature (Maharjan 2018). It is suggested that Fig 1 is a truer reflection of the existing PA process.
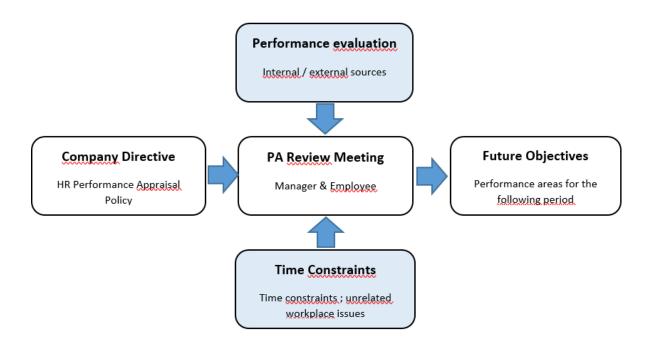
Fig 1 : Proposed model reflecting the PA communication process
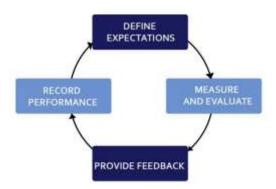
COMPONENTS OF PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

Fig 2 Components of Performance Appraisal. Maharjan (2018)

The PA process has been depicted as involving :-

- A HR policy.
- A review of employee peformance.
- A 1 :1 discussion with the manager.
- Improvement areas – which are usually focussed on productivity or outputs.

(Weinstein 2016 ; Kinley & Ben-Hur 2017 ; Rothwell 1993)

Further to this, literature also shows some key issues which are continually arising (Suddah 2013, Campeau 2012, Belew 2016, Ellis 2017, Weinstein 2016). These identify that PA:

- Involves difficult discussions

- Is an unloved process

- Is time consuming

- Holds bias factors – factors unrelated to your job performance

- What is said is not the same as what is heard.   (Haden 2015)

So, there are key issues surrounding the PA process which are not existing models nor within literature. Of these, this research focuses on the employee side of the PA process, specifically management promises and the impact these have on employee behaviour.

Research structure

The structure of this research exposes existing literature and definitions from which a flow of related themes stem (Fig 3). This foundation is in understanding the PA itself, branching off to focus seperately on management and employee perspectives.
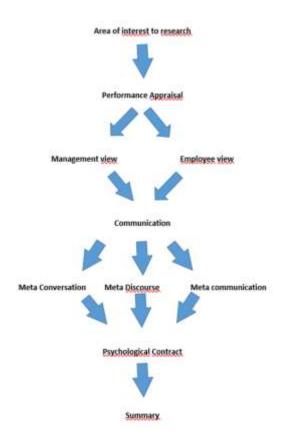

Figure 3. Structure of the research

The PA literature addressing the management side appears to focus specifically on handling and implementation of the process itself. Whereas literature exploring the employee side of the PA continually raises the theme of communication issues. At the outset, this research was intended to focus on the role of informal communication however, this led to a refined search that was more precise and specific of three communication categories of : Metacommunication, meta conversation, and meta discourse (Ahn et al 2003; Hyland 1998; Ferrazzi 2013; Misnevs and Demairay 2017).

Metacommunication

According to Fogel and Branco (1997:68) metacommunication is where people

'*communicate in the past, present or future*'

which can influence the interpersonal relationships

'by making explicit connect of the future with the past or present … where outcomes depend on how it is interpreted and how that interpretation play(s) out in action.

This definion fits in the context of the PA. Applying these definitions to the PA incorporates both management and employee perspectives to endorse that indeed it is metacommunication that is taking place. Furthermore, Haden (2015 :1) states that it is possible the reason the PA is difficult may well be due to managers who

> '… 'flub' the annual review meeting, … where managers 'talk about plans that (they) aren't absolutely sure (to) deliver', including where a manager may 'intend' to offer training for example'.

Literature shows that the PA has all these elements mentioned, elements requiring further exploration to determine their full potential in the context of the PA (Haden 2015; Fogel and Branco 2014).

Psychological Contract

These communication themes develop further by linking with employee expectations which fall within the realms of the Psychological Contract.

The Psychological Contract (PC) lends an additional complexity to communication in the business relationship due to its very nature of being an implicit agreement of what is expected to be given and received (Nelson and Quick 2013; Rousseau 1989). This research will consider this 'intangible', implicit element which appears to form an integral part of the business relationship (Wernerfelt 2007) in the context of the PA.

From a business perspective, the need for there to be a good relationship between and employee and their manager argues that psychological detachment is detrimental to an organisation (Hamilton-Skurak et al 2018), where Poulsen et al (2014:158) suggested

> 'that high engagement was associated with low levels of psychological detachment.'

It is the psychological engagement or disengagment which is proposed as a key factor connected directly to the PA. This is supported by Schein 1965 who stated that the psychological contract is a powerful determiner of behaviour in organisations with Haden (2015:1) finding that

> 'management 'flub' the annual review meeting, …managers 'talk about plans that (they) aren't absolutely sure (to) deliver' – promotion, pay, training etc.

The value of exploring the impact of metacommunication and the PC, is to idenfify the root cause of the negative emptions discussed within the PA literature.

PINCH CRUNCH MODEL (Sherwood and Glidewell 1973)

The contexts of the PA process can be applied to the Pinch Crunch Model developed by Sherwood & Glidewell 1973 (Fig 4).
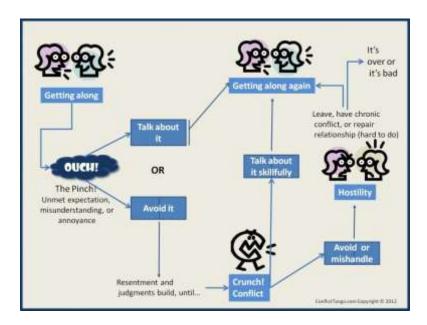
Fig 4 Pinch Crunch Model (Sherwood and Glidewell 1973)

The Pinch Crunch model (Sherwood and Glidewell 1973) offers scope in context to the PA as it specifically mentions the role of 'talk' and 'relationship' as factors that can influence a reaction by the receiver. Even moreso, talk as being a key factor in the 'pinch' or 'crunch' stages of the employee/er relationship.

- Getting along – can apply to any stage of the employment contract, the interview, the agreement, meeting colleagues, talking to HR
- Pinch – being annoyed but hold hope for improvement.
- Crunch being … the relationship damaged or broken with the employee, disengaging psychologically or physically from the organisation.

Exploratory study :

In 2018, an exploratory study in order to test which method would be best fit for this research was undertaken in the form of shadowing and also semi-structured interviewing. These took place in Australia, France and UK due to existing networks and accessibiltiy to respondents. Additionally the three countries have different cultures in relation to management styles allowing the perspective of the phenomena being a management issue directly linked to the influence of metacommunication. The influence of metacommunication linked directly to the psychological contract and employee reactions. Two shadowing exercises were completed and 35 semi-structured interviews undertaken.

Initial reactions to the PA fell within four main categories:

1. 'deep sigh' – here we go again,, 'whatever'. Disengaged.
2. Oooh, great, Yes, I've been looking forward to this meeting. Something will come of it – maybe training, increased salary or a promotion.

3. I'm so fed up of the continual promises not eventuating.   More promises, promises.
4. No reaction at all – it's a process and worrying won't change anything.

Supporting the suitability of the Pinch-Crunch model (Sherwood and Glidewell 1973), a specific sample from the exploratory study, (a semi structured interview), can be directly applied. The subject (X) had been with the company for a year, straight after graduating. They had accepted a low package as they were assured that after a year, they would go up a pay scale and receive a bonus for projects delivered.

Applying this response to the Pinch Crunch model (Sherwood & Glidewell 1973) can be applied as :

Pinch – it wasn't fantastic but no significant negative reaction. However, the engineer was looking forward to an annual review in a few days time. That is, until a colleague phoned to discuss how the meeting went for them. The colleague explained to X that there was no payrise, only that they all had to work harder and deliver more in the coming year.

X was talking to others to 'seek advice' as to challenge the boss about the promises or not. From the discussions, X decided on two possible sets of actions. They fall within the context of 'crunch'.

Crunch – to leave or not put in as much effort until they found a new job within or outside the organisation.

In line with this, further results included similar reactions where the employee would decide once they'd had the meeting as to whether they would resign from the organisation or psychologically quit by adhering to contract hours (Golin 2017).

These initial findings support literature, that indeed employees have high tension and emotional reactions prior to meeting their manager and carry in to the meeting without the manager being aware of it. This supports the argument that yes, managers have 'difficult discussions' however this research will expose the basis of these reactions.

CONCLUSION

From existing literature and definitions, managers talking to employees about the PA process fits within the definition of meta communication. Employees talking with others falls within the definition of metacommunication. Yet the consequence of that 'talk' is potentially a major consequence which remains unexplored.

This research will build upon Haden (2015) by exploring the importance of management 'promises' as a form of metacommunication. Despite literature endorsing that the PA is an important process as potentially a constructive and valuable organisational process, there is a gap in literature exploring the phenomena taking place around the PA. It is proposed that this is impacting on both management and employees, as a root cause of the negativity surrounding the process as a whole.

So, research and the exploratory study have led to a model which maps what appears as to what is truly happening around the Performance Appraisal which is more complicated than existing literature portays (Fig.1 and Fig.2). So too, by exposing the web of communication helps idenfity the complexities of the PA as a truer reflection of the PA process expanding on Fig 1.
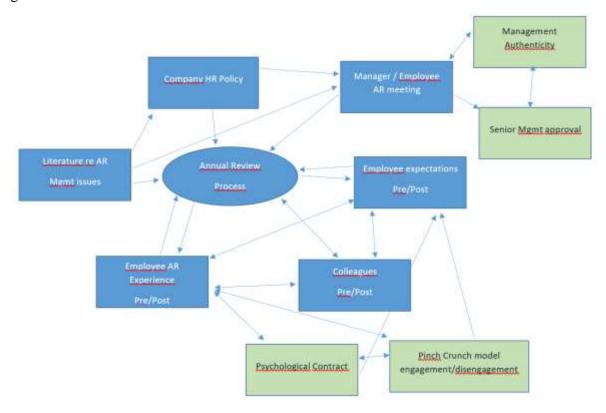

Fig 5 : Proposed thematic web of meta-communication surrounding the PA

This model web of communication will be explored further to determine the impact on an employee, the influence it has on their expectations and actions within the workplace. This addresses a gap in literature and and in management knowledge by identifying the unwritten facets of the PA and the influence it has on employee behaviour, offering a new perspective to the Pinch Crunch Model (Sherwood and Glidewell 1973).

The research question and objectives.

To determine the role of meta communication on employee expectations during the PA process.

Specifically…

- Types of Meta Communication Pre, During and Post Performance appraisal.
- Whether the frequency of the PA has an impact on MC.
- That is – if the appraisal happens more frequently is there a lower level of MC ?

- What is the role of MC on the PC in connection to the PA meeting – what level of influence does it have on an employee's defensiveness and hopes of positive changes ?

Methodology :

Based on the research onion by Saunders et al (2007) this research is defined as:

Interpretative – as the phenomena involves the psychological contract.

Mixed methods – using both a questionnaire to give validity through qualitative data - and interviews to explore deeper on certain questions in the questionnaire.

Cross sectional - as data will be collected from a wide network – not just one department, nor sector nor organisation.

Next stages :

All going well – the ambition is to have the data ready for analysis by the end of 2019 with material for pubication during 2020 based on the interpretation of the findings.

Contribution :

This research holds importance for both management and organisations by contributing to knowledge by addressing the gap in literature.

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