

Line Managers as Catalysts of the Effectiveness of the Performance Management Systems: A Case of a Public Higher Education Institution

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Abstract: This paper analyses the perceptions of the employees on the role played by their line manager in ensuring the success of the performance management system. This paper builds on earlier studies, which found that most performance management systems fail irrespective of how good the systems appear to have been designed. Since line managers are regarded as the gatekeepers of the performance management systems in most organisations, it is therefore, essential to analyse employees' perceptions with regard to the role of their line managers in ensuring that the performance management systems become effective. The study followed a quantitative methodology. Data was collected through a self-administered quantitative survey questionnaire, which was distributed online. Census sampling method was used in which the whole target population were sent a questionnaire to a total of 1775 academic staff in the case university. Approximately 313 questionnaires were returned and analysed. A one-sample t-test was conducted to analyse data. The results revealed that the academic staff members were satisfied with their performance management system because they trusted their line managers in respect of performance management matters. Employees perceive their managers to be knowledgeable about performance management process. Moreover, the results indicate that employees tend to accept the performance management systems that embrace trust, fairness, as well as a guaranteed confidentiality from their line manager. In addition, the results further shed some light that a good line manager-employee relationship that is based on trust or a two-way approach in the performance management process result in highly satisfied employees in terms of their performance ratings, which ultimately translate into successful performance management systems. This paper concludes that a performance management system should be designed in such a way that it is applied consistently to all employees and must take into consideration employees' inputs.

Keywords: Distributive justice, Interactional justice, Line managers, Performance management system, Procedural justice

1. Introduction

One of the biggest challenges put on business leaders by the influx of globalisation is their ability to promote sustainable human resource policies that can heighten the performance of the organisation (Imran, Arif, Cheema & Azeem, 2014). Such policies include a policy on attracting, developing, retaining, empowering, managing performance and rewarding a diverse array of appropriately skilled people with an endeavour to improve organisational performance. This approach calls for a strong observation of the daily activities of their processes through a performance management system (PMS) simply because organisations rely on its employees for survival. In other words, the development of a PMS at the individual level supports performance management (PM) at the organisational level (Decramer, Christiaens and Vanderstaenten (2008). Idemobi and Onyeizugbe (2011) further suggest that PM is an

instrument that focusses on managing the individual and the work environment in such a manner that an individual or team can achieve set organisational goals. This extends to the educational sector since excellence is not just for goods produced in the factory but excellence in education is also mandatory. Excellence in general terms means the quality, value or the worth placed on a particular thing. Debates about excellence in university teaching have been gaining prominence since the late 1990s (Little, Locke, Parker & Richardson, 2007, MacGregor, 2016).

The monitoring of work of the academics was neglected in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the past. This led to HEIs to operate on "high trust" mode that allowed more freedom given to the academic staff without any monitoring system (Molefe, 2012). Unfortunately, the self-directed nature of such institutions together with the idea of academic autonomy raises some challenges for university management

in their endeavour to promote an effective performance assessment and management system (Broad & Goddard, 2010). As a result, the introduction of PMS of some sort in HEIs to monitor and manage the performance of their academic staff to ensure that the investment is justified. This means that the HEIs institutions are managed applying the same ideologies used in the private sector, which may be counterattacked by the academics who appreciated the academic freedom and self-directness over a long time (Mapesela, 2004).

The literature recommends that line managers are in the right position to monitor employee performance (Hutchinson & Purcell, 2008; Ngcamu, 2012; Aguinis, 2014; Armstrong, 2014). Aguinis and Pierce (2007) argue that if employees believe that their line manager has the ability to influence vital tangible and intangible rewards such as financial rewards, recognition, then the PMS is likely to be more meaningful and stands a chance to prosper. Since the success of any PMS depends on the opinions of employees, it becomes crucial to analyse and examine how employees perceive the way their line managers manage their performance. Accordingly, this study aims to analyse the perceptions of the academic staff at the case university on the part played by their line managers in safeguarding that the institution's PMS is bear fruits it is expected to bear.

2. Performance Management System

Performance management is not performance appraisal. Nayab (2011) describes performance appraisal as a limited and responsive function of assessing past performance, undertaken once or twice a year. Similarly, Aguinis, Joo and Gottfredson (2011) also view performance appraisal as the illustration of the strengths and weaknesses of employees in a non-continuous manner, usually just once a year. It must be noted that performance appraisal is a key element of performance management (Gruman & Saks, 2011). Performance management is much more than just assessing performance (Aguinis, 2014; Wörnich, Carrel, Elbert & Hatfield, 2018). Aguinis (2014:3) defines PM as "a continuous process of identifying, measuring and developing the performance of individuals and teams and aligning performance with strategic goals of the organisation". In this context, the concept of PM is constructed on the supposition that clarifying measureable and rewardable work program leads to organisational success (Bussin, 2017).

Doubts about the success of PMS systems have long-persuaded scholars and specialists to find out ways of gauging it (Sharma, Sharma & Agarwal, 2016; Bussin, 2017). In fact, the PMS has not always helped achieving the desired results as expected (Naji, Mansour & Leclerc, 2015). Additionally, the history of PMS at the South African universities is not a success story as the academic staff perceives it as a management tool intended at harsher and close supervision (Ngcamu, 2012); which is in conflicting with the unique academic freedom academics enjoyed for a long time (Decramer *et al.*, 2008; Molefe, 2012). Therefore, a good relationship between evaluators (line managers) must be established in order to achieve a buy-in from employees and eventually, positive perception concerning the PMS, and acceptance of the system thereof.

3. Line Managers

A line manager is someone who has direct supervisory accountability, normally for non-managerial employees, and are located at the lower levels of management ladder, often the first-line level (Hutchinson & Purcell, 2003). Other words used interchangeably with this concept in the literature are supervisor, team leader and front-line manager. Line managers are considered as gate-keepers of the PMS. This is because they are well-informed about strategic issues of the organisation, understand performance and are generally in charge of managing performance on a daily basis (Aguinis, 2014; Armstrong, 2014). This therefore makes them appropriate source of performance information, only if they have the required skills (Bussin, 2017). However, the PMS of any organisation depends mainly on whether the line managers respects and maintains confidentiality in all dealings, including PM matters (Aguinis, 2014). In spite of the line managers been seen as the appropriate people to assess employee performance, Armstrong (2014) and Lauritsen (2018:21) argue that they are not doing this very well. This is due to the subjective and multifaceted nature of the PM process and less training in this process; which results in line managers to be unwilling and lack commitment in its application (Hutchinson & Purcell, 2008; Hirsh, Brown, Chubb & Reilly, 2011; Armstrong, 2014). Therefore, since the line managers are considered to be the main role-players in the successful execution of the PMS it is crucial to scrutinise how their subordinates perceive the way they implement this system.

4. Performance Management in Higher Education

The utmost important roles of the higher education (HE) institution system in any community apart from teaching and learning (T&L) are construction of new knowledge, research work and community services. Consequently, South African HE received extraordinary attention from the larger society, and it is still facing extraordinary challenges (Council of Higher Education, [CHE] 2010). In essence, 'higher education' means all learning programmes which must be registered in accordance with the provisions of the National Qualifications Framework Act, 2008 (Act No. 67 of 2008), as a qualification or part-qualification on the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQSF), irrespective of whether such programmes are in fact registered or not on the sub-framework" (Higher Education Amendment Bill, 2015:1). Since 1994, government's support for HE has been noteworthy. The funding of universities has been on an upward movement, from R11 billion in 2006 to R16.3 billion in 2013, 2016 and 2019 respectively (Higher Education South Africa [HESA], 2014, Budget Speech SA, 2016, Budget Speech SA, 2019). This is the highest rates of public investment in education in the world (SAinfo reporter, 2013). Accordingly, universities are increasingly expected to become responsible for their own input and process conditions, which resulted in top management in HEIs to embark on monitoring and managing the performance of their staff in general, including academic staff. This is done with a view to encourage quality in T&L and increased research outputs. In other words, HEIs became more 'entrepreneurial', and research in these institutions has been 'commercialised' (CHE, 2010; Sawyerr, 2004). One of the systems designed to monitor the work of academics in the HEIs is the PMS, which is not well accepted by academics (Mapesela, 2004; Ndambakuwa, 2006; Molefe, 2012, Nzuve & Monica, 2012). The main challenge is that PMS are comparatively new to education, having its origins from industry and the commercial environment, and they are therefore commonly seen with a high degree of mistrust by academics particularly (Barret & Barret, 2008; Parsons & Slabbert, 2001).

5. Employee Perceptions

"The success or failure of every organisation relies on how well its employees perceive fairness in its policy application" (Dartey-Baah, 2014:1). Ahmed, Ramzan, Khushi and Islam, (2011) define a perception as a

process by which individuals organise and interpret their sensory impressions in order to give meaning to their environment. However, it should be noted that perceptions can be diverse from the reality objective because different people have different behaviours and thoughts, therefore they will be disagreement among people view (Kaleem, Jabeen & Twana, 2013). According to these scholars, a person's perception is influenced by their personal characteristics, which include a person insolences, persona, intentions, interests, past experiences and anticipations. The perception of fairness towards the PMS is a vital for realising employee's satisfaction (Naji, Mansour & Leclerc, 2015, Vveinhardt & Papšiene, 2013, Luthra & Jain, 2012). For employees to counter the PM practices in their organisation, they should first perceive these practices as unbiased and reasonable. For instance, if employees perceive the PMS as subjective, partial and lacking rigour, it is unlikely that they will accept the finales of the system.

In other words, a good perception about PMS will create a affirmative working environment in the organisation while a negative perception will create a lot of harms to the organisation and finally will affect the company performance (Kaleem *et al.*, 2013). However, a good line manager-employee relationship can reduce negative perception by applying reasonable and impartial PM practices, which is referred to as organisational justice (Greenbeg, 1990). According to Greenberg (1990), justice or fairness refers to the idea that an action or decision is morally correct, which may be defined according to ethics, religion, fairness, equity or law. Greenberg (1990) further identified three types of justices that if applied in the organisation can enhance commitment among employees which are distributive, procedural and interactional justice. Distributive justice is built on the principles of Adams' (1963) equity theory. According to this theory, people compare their own perceived work outcomes (rewards) in relation to their own perceived work inputs (contributions) with the corresponding ratios of a co-worker (Adams, 1963). In other words, employees compare themselves with other employees to find out whether they are being treated fairly. On the other hand, procedural justice is concerned with justice of procedures, that is, how a specific decision was reached. For instance, if an employee is rated negatively by the line manager during a performance review, chances are that such an employee may question either the reliability, ethicality or accurateness of the procedure followed to

arrive at the final decision (negative rating). Lastly, interactional fairness reflects the quality of relations with the decision maker, that is, in terms of whether the decision maker acts with respect and dignity and provides suitable and rational reasoning to the workers. In brief, in order to create positive perceptions in employees regarding the organisation's PMS, the all three types of justices discussed must be perceived to be present by employees.

6. Methods and Materials

This was study case study in nature, a census survey methodology was deemed more suitable. Descriptive statistics were applied to process and analyse biographic information, while inferential statistics were employed using the one-way t-test to test for the means and significant level of the respondents' answers to the questionnaire items. 1 775 academic staff members of the open distance learning (ODL) institution were surveyed. Data was collected from the primary participants through a self-structured, self-constructed questionnaire consisting of four sections. Each of these sections was measured on a 5-point Likert Scale (anchored on 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = strongly agree'). Out of the targeted sample of 1 775, only 492 questionnaires were received back from the respondents, out of which only 313 questionnaires (which constitute 18% of the target population) were entirely and properly completed; therefore, usable for statistical analysis.

A five-point Likert scale (anchored on 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) were used for each of the 11 items. The eleven items were intended to establish the extent to which academics perceive their line manager to be playing any role to ensure that the PMS is effectively implemented. The assumption was that there is a relationship between how academics perceive the way their line managers implement the PMS and the success of the system. The aim of the researcher therefore was to see if this was correct and to further establish to what extent.

7. Results and Discussion

To analyse data, a one-sample t-test was used, which tests whether a population mean is considerably different from some theorised value. One-sample t-test is more suitable when the research involves only one measurement variable, and the researcher intends to match the mean value of the measurement variable with some hypothetical anticipations. The current

study measured the perceptions of all academic staff (regardless of their positions) in the case university regarding the role of their line managers in the implementation of the PMS, which suggests a variable with only one-measurement. The following section presents the statistical results and discussion of results. The results from the one-sample t-test statistics are depicted in Table 1 on the following page.

From the results the most of the respondents agree that the line managers play a vital role in safeguarding that the PMS become effective. The respondents further showed that they are content with their managers evaluating their performance. Managers' role in the application of PMS cannot be over-emphasised as they provide verdict in evaluating how employees perform. For managers to successfully pass such a decision, they need more information regarding what needs to be considered when providing performance scores, and further essentially, must be able to correctly rationalise the evaluation scores to employees, in case they require such. The following section presents the respondents views on the 11 items asked.

7.1 My Line Manager is in a Good Position to Review My Performance

The results of this question showed that most of the respondents do not perceive their reporting line managers to be properly positioned to evaluate their individual performances (\bar{x} 3.42 & σ 1.248). These results deviate however from the recommendations of Aguinis (2014) who claims that managers are commonly in a better location to monitor and assess the performance of their employees relative to strategic organisational goals. This is because managers have the accountability to operationalise strategic goals which they in turn use as a principle in reviewing the performance of individual employees who work directly under their supervision.

7.2 My Line Manager is Knowledgeable in Implementing the Performance Management System

Whether of managers had adequate knowledge of implementing the PMS was not in doubt with statistical results of \bar{x} 3.45 and σ 1.168 respectively. This is concurring with the study by CIPD (2005) which found that 57% of organisations that took part agree that they train those involved in performance appraisal. Oddly however, this result could not be

Table 1: Results of One-Sample t-Test Statistics

One-sample statistics				
The Role of Managers in Ensuring the Effectiveness of the Performance Management System				
	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean
Q.1 My manager is in a good position to review my performance.	313	3.42	1.248	0.071
Q.2 My manager is knowledgeable in implementing the performance management system.	313	3.45	1.168	0.066
Q.3 My manager applies the performance management system in accordance with the institutional policy.	313	3.49	1.115	0.063
Q.4 It is possible to provide evidence of my performance to my manager in order to justify my ratings.	313	3.74	1.115	0.063
Q.5 My manager gives me the rating that I have earned even if it might upset me.	313	3.40	1.139	0.064
Q.6 My manager gives me the rating that I have earned even if it might upset the manager.	313	3.23	1.149	0.065
Q.7 My rating is the result of my manager trying to avoid bad feelings among employees.	313	2.20	1.089	0.062
Q.8 My manager provides me with clear explanations that justify the ratings I get for my work.	313	3.29	1.164	0.066
Q.9 My manager judges the work I perform, not me as an individual.	313	3.47	1.138	0.064
Q.10 My manager rates employee performance consistently across all employees.	313	3.03	1.167	0.066
Q.11 I have an opportunity to ask my manager to clarify my ratings.	313	3.77	1.028	0.058

Source: Author

maintained by Flaniken (2009) who found that many organisations fail to provide managers with adequate performance management training, which make managers less knowledgeable to evaluate employee performance. Another study further indicated that line managers lack adequate capability to apply human resource management (HRM) policies, and that they are not interested in implementing HRM yet preparedness is essential for someone to perform effectively (Terhalle, 2009). The instant result could maybe be due to insufficient training by management of the case institution resulting from lack of consultation and participation of all interested parties in the design and execution of the PMS as revealed in the earlier findings of this paper. Haines and St-Onge (2012) reiterated that organisations that provide more PM training have PMS that bring more esteemed results.

7.3 My Line Manager Applies the Performance Management System in Accordance with the Institutional Policy

The PMS implementation should be directed by the appropriate institutional policy. To this end

the respondents were asked if this was the case. Although a most of the respondents concurred with this statement (\bar{x} 3.49), this result could not be regarded as precisely illustrative of the respondents with a σ 1.115. Even though data concerning the PMS is accessible on the institution's Intranet, a sensible number of respondents could not establish whether managers implemented the system in according to what the policy of the institution prescribes. This perhaps could be the cause for the conflicting degree of standard deviation documented (σ 1.115). The result in this study thus replicates a commendation by Aguinis (2014) that PM policy must be established and applied in such a way that it directs managers and employees on how to handle PMS issues.

7.4 It is Possible to Provide Evidence of My Performance to My Line Manager in Order to Justify My Ratings

This question was asked in order to determine whether it is possible for the respondents to make available to their line managers evidence of their performance in order to validate their performance ratings. The statistical evidence (\bar{x} = 3.74) indicated

that the respondents are keen to provide evidence of their performance for the purpose of performance rating by their managers. Again, this could not be said to accurately represent the perception of the respondents given the discrepancy of the standard deviation ($\sigma = 1.115$) from the mean. This perception could be responsible for the contrast in this study to that of Flaniken (2009), who argued that most work outcomes in organisations are realised due to team-work rather than individual effort, thus making reviewing individual performance inappropriate to assess employees' performance in such organisations. In the surveyed institution, however, most of the respondents agreed that it is possible for them to provide evidence to their line managers to validate their performance ratings.

7.5 My Line Manager Gives Me the Rating that I Have Earned Even if it Might Upset Me

The respondents were asked whether they believe that their line managers give them the rating they have earned even if it might upset them. The respondents did not agree on this question in general, given the mean statistic of ($\bar{x} = 3.4$) and the standard deviation of $\sigma = 1.139$. However, it could be concluded that there was evidence that managers do provide academic staff members with ratings proportionate with their work performance. This result also found support in the work of Flaniken (2009) and Aguinis (2014), who argue that raters should focus on the work standards and goals set in the beginning of the PM cycle when evaluating employees and give them feedback on whether they were achieved or not.

7.6 My Line Manager Gives Me the Rating that I Have Earned Even if it Might Upset the Manager

The responses attained to this question almost relate to those in the previous question. Most of the respondents were not totally sure whether their managers get disappointed with the ratings that have been given to them (academic staff). The statistical evidence showed a mean of $\bar{x} = 3.74$ and a standard deviation of $\sigma = 1.149$. This result coincided with results by Aguinis (2014), who emphasises that managers must at all cost avoid stick to constructive criticism when evaluating employee performance, regardless of how disappointed they are with their performance. This will help to reduce negative feeling and chances for conflict.

7.7 My Rating is the Result of My Line Manager Trying to Avoid Bad Feelings Among Employees

Findings of the previous research, for instance Flaniken (2009) emphasised that managers should rate employees in based on predetermined goals and standards, no matter how employees feel. Likewise, Aguinis (2014) cautions that managers should always be positive when providing employees with their performance feedback in order to minimise negative feelings and conflict. The result of the present study showed $\bar{x} = 3.4$ and $\sigma = 1.139$, proposing that the most of the respondents disagreed that they are given ratings by their managers in order to avoid bad feelings. The respondents believed that their ratings are impartial and that their ratings are without any prejudice by their managers.

7.8 My Line Manager Provides Me with Clear Explanations that Justify the Ratings I Get for My Work

Most of the respondents indicated that they were not sure whether they get validations from their managers to defend the ratings they get. The results obtained showed a little above average ($\bar{x} = 3.29$) with $\sigma = 1.164$. These findings are in contrast with the findings of Karuhanga (2010), who found that a major problem with PMS was inadequate feedback to employees about their performance, and in some cases, it was discovered that there was no performance assessment at all.

7.9 My Line Manager Judges the Work I Perform, Not Me as an Individual

The results obtained from the respondents indicated that most of the respondents agreed that the ratings they get are in line with their work performance, rather than personality. These results, $\bar{x} = 3.47$ with $\sigma = 1.138$, provided further endorsement of the results attained in questions 12 and 13 respectively on the issues of impartiality and personality of their managers in carrying out the PM review.

7.10 My manager Rates Employee Performance Consistently Across All

The results showed in Table 1 indicated $\bar{x} = 3.03$ with $\sigma = 1.167$, suggesting that the respondents were neutral regarding the consistency in the way their managers handle the PMS. This finding could

be due to the fact that the PMS is conducted on a one-to-one basis between employees and their managers. Therefore, a comparison among individual performance ratings was not possible. The confidentiality nature of the PMS is promoted by the claim by Aguinis (2014), who stresses that managers should always reassure employees about the discretion of personal information composed from each of them.

7.11 I Have an Opportunity to Ask My Manager to Clarify My Ratings

Any open PMS should make it possible for employees to probe raters for clarification and possibly rationalisation of their performance rating. (Aguinis, 2014). Most of the respondents showed that they are given an opportunity to request explanations about their performance ratings from their managers. This results, $\bar{x} = 3.77$ and $\sigma = 1.028$, somewhat strengthened the findings obtained in Question 4, to the effect that employees received some kind of rationalisation concerning their ratings; and got clarity on how to improve their performance (if necessary) in the future. This finding was in agreement with earlier research results by Aguinis *et al.* (2011), who state that a PMS works as a vital communication tool that is two-way, as it make clear the types of activities and outcomes that are required and remunerated by the organisation; and at the same time provides a platform for employees to give inputs in relation to their work.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed to determine how the respondents view the role their managers play to ensure that the PMS become effective. To adequately get into the bottom of this question and address this objective, several questions were developed and tested. Most of the respondents indicated that they are satisfied with their managers assessing their performance. They showed that their managers have satisfactory knowledge about vital features of their occupations and are therefore the most appropriate people to assess their performance. The respondents further indicated that they do not perceive any biasness from their managers when providing them with the ratings they allocate and that they receive enough feedback concerning their performance.

The majority of the respondents in this study, however, showed that they are not sure whether their

managers rate performance consistently across all employees. This could be since performance-review meetings are confidential; therefore, it is difficult for individual employees to access details about other individuals' performance ratings. Accordingly, employees are unable to relate the performance ratings they get to what other co-workers received.

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