A Review of Culbert’s Book “Get Rid of the Performance Review”: An Impractical Suggestion

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Abstract

When selecting my topic focused on leaders recognizing employee contributions during performance reviews for my doctoral dissertation and post-doctoral research and publications, one book continued to appear in my reviewed article file Samuel A. Culbert’s: Get Rid of the Performance Review! How Companies Can Stop Intimidating, Start Managing—and Focus on What Really Matters. Although I cited this book in my dissertation and a subsequent journal publication to substantiate at least one dissenting perspective of the need for employee performance reviews, I struggled to fully understand Culbert’s perspective of this organizational process. A recent re-read of “Get Rid of the Performance Review!” prompted me to write a review and explain why I disagree with 99.9% of Culbert’s now antiquated opinion and why I believe his suggestion is impractical for organizational wellbeing.

Introduction

Culbert is an award-winning and respected faculty member at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Anderson School of Management in California. As the Professor of Management and Organizations, he teaches leadership and behavioral-focused courses (UCLA, 2021). This book is one of several books I consider more opinion pieces than actual research. Therefore, the book title is most appropriate as it relates to the topic, Get Rid of the Performance Review! and that Culbert believes performance reviews are detrimental to building trust and collaborative relationships between leaders and subordinates. However, his perspective that providing employees with feedback is a detractor to creating or improving organizational relationships appears to be a minority opinion compared to the literature and my research over the 10 years following the publication of Culbert’s book.
Review

Among the 10 chapters, Culbert weaves a sinister perspective of performance reviews, starting with Chapter 1, and continuing. Some attention-getting statements are, “everyone who’s evaluated hates it” (Chapter 1, p. 1) to “It’s all bullshit” (Chapter 3, p. 44) [and] “a sham!” (Chapter 1, p. 1). He uses terms to relate how “everybody” feels or experiences performance reviews as follows:

1. For employees: Fear, intimidation, punishment.
2. For leaders: Domination, insensitive, insecurity, power play, and incompetence.

Missing from Culbert’s discussion in Chapter 2 is mention of the Hawthorne Studies, the actual beginning of Mayo’s focus on human resources and measuring performance, productivity, and employee satisfaction (Mayo, 1933; Openstax, 2018). While management by objectives (MBO) is nearly a 100-year-old system for measuring performance goals, the refinement and fine-tuning over the 10 years since Culbert published his perspective are less detrimental. As such, most organizations have continued to offer performance reviews.

Chapter 3 is obviously, and ironically titled as it appears; that is, the statement “From My Point of View, I’m Objective” (p. 35) is inaccurate. The crux of the chapter defines where Culbert’s opinions run rampant, as it appears the chapter, and several others, contain a recall of bad experiences someone may have had in their career. My question is: Does Culbert’s experience mean that everyone else in the universe had that same experience? A leader’s role is to continually evaluate employees’ progress toward meeting organizational goals, good or bad; employees will succeed or fail. I see Culbert blaming leaders for noticing the weaknesses in employees and then opining that telling employees they could do something better is done on purpose.

A divisive issue Culbert discusses is the pay-for-performance campaigns some organizations provide. I agree that being hired to work for a company is an instant qualifier for being paid to perform. However, in Culbert’s mind, the extra incentive benefits offered have a negative connotation that does not follow the usual clearly stated quid pro quo. A boss asking an employee to get a 20-page report completed by 5:00 pm Friday and earn a $100 bonus requires the employee to weigh their time and abilities to complete the task to obtain the bonus. Agreeing to the terms but not meeting the goal is a risk taken by the employee. Missing that deadline could be part of a performance review, with an opportunity to discuss a new goal: to improve timeline expectations for projects.

The topic of Chapter 5 is extremely negative and quite shocking. Remember, this book is an opinion piece about abolishing performance reviews. He states that the true purpose of the performance review is to discover what an employee does well and where the employee needs to improve. However, the connotation is that employees believe there is “something wrong with them” if leaders discover a weakness. However, the ultimate and most poignant statement in this chapter is WHY we should have performance reviews: “[...] the goal is simply this: To improve the bottom line of the company“ (p. 93).
Teamwork is one of the top-rated organizational strategies. Culbert views teamwork as an equal opportunity contribution among a group of employees. Most leaders know this is untrue (Conzelmann, 2020a, 2020b). A group of five employees will not share the work equally at 20% each; someone will be the leader, someone will be the lagger, and three people will balance somewhere between the two other employees. How amusing and ironic to see a negative statement in Chapter 6 about Jack Welch’s employee ranking, used when he was CEO at General Electric. The ranking for employees is that 20% of employees are an organization’s A players, 70% are B players, and 10% are the detractors from success (Welch & Welch, 2005). One of the founding principles of Welch’s book “Winning,” published five years before Culbert published his book, is still a foundational principle taught at Welch’s namesake MBA program 10 years after the publication of Culbert’s book, wherein he says that using Welch’s formula means “nobody wins” (Culbert, 2010, p. 124). Many leaders would beg to differ (Conzelmann, 2020a, 2020b).

After reading six chapters of what appears to be an extensive complaint about giving employees performance reviews and feedback, so they know what they are doing right and how they can improve—several points of negative foci, Culbert suggested a solution, a “better way […] a performance preview” (Chapter 7, p. 143). Is that not what one would call the interview process; learning what skills, education, and expertise one needs for organizational and personal success? Additionally, would any meeting to go over job-specific expectations and need for improvement be noted as a performance review? I had to pause to wrap my head around the first six chapters when I read that statement. I was finally able to read on, but in the next section, Culbert says he is not against performance reviews and providing employees helpful feedback to be successful, but that companies should do away with the performance review. At this stage of this book review, an odd perspective is noted. That is, the title of the book “Get rid of the Performance Review!” but then the statement,

I also want to dispel a possible misperception: that I am against evaluating performance and holding people accountable for results. Nothing could be more off the mark. I believe every imperfect performer (read: everyone) must receive feedback relevant to improving his or her effectiveness and accomplishing company results. (Culbert, 2010, p. 122)

The last three chapters of this book provide a long explanation for some very simple statements and suggestions. First, while Culbert professed throughout the book to “Get Rid of the Performance Review!” it is not truly the performance review he focused on, but the variables of the process that he seems to believe can be controlled using a script of some type that also inspires leaders and employees to hold a meaningful discussion. Second, about those factors: The boss and employee do not get along, the boss is on a power trip, or the employee has a chip on their shoulder. Third, when Culbert states people are imperfect, that is also a byproduct of the performance review process—those are just as fallible as any other process—based on how people feel or relate. Finally, at the end of Chapter 10, Culbert states that completely ending the performance review process would change the value of one’s job, that animosity between leaders and employers would end, everyone would become friends, be inspired to enjoy their work, and there would be less gossip, tardiness, and complaining (p. 225). However, the opposite could be true if performance reviews are abolished; people might feel less valued, become agitated because they have no guidance and feedback, not get along with many coworkers, become complacent and uncaring, and spread rumors.
Discussion

When “Get Rid of the Performance Review” was published in 2010, some intense issues were noted regarding employee performance reviews, which continues to be true. Culbert wrote about the negative impact of employee performance reviews. His inferred intent writing on the topic was to inform organizational contributors [leaders and employees] about the [his] negative and demeaning perception of the employee review process that lowers employee motivation and productivity and offers suggestions for improvement (Culbert, 2010). The only improvement suggested by Culbert, from his purview, was for organizations to abolish the performance review to remove the process that negatively influences employee motivation, performance, and satisfaction—but—add the performance preview.

After reading the reviews on Amazon, noting the book has a 4-star rating, one review stood out to me,

Robdew: 2.0 out of 5 stars. Lots of information why the traditional annual performance review process is horribly flawed, but not so much practical advice on what to do to replace them OR sell the process to your organization. Reviewed in the United States on July 16, 2015

Reading this book only made me see there is more need than ever to keep the performance review process. Since the publication of Culbert’s book, researchers are revealing an increased need to have these performance review conversations (see Conzelmann, 2020a, 2020b), and yes, some may be difficult. That is, if an employee is coming to work, not producing any work, but receiving a paycheck, the employee is not meeting the required expectations to hold the job, and the organization may experience detrimental outcomes from the lack of productivity. Welch’s “rank and yank” (p. 124) process, as Culbert termed the 20/70/10 ranking, is proved effective, just as much as providing necessary feedback in a performance review or preview.

The literature supporting Culbert’s perspective is limited. One source discussed the leadership perspective of performance reviews, suggesting that feedback, recognition, and rewards do not influence employee perceptions of value to the organization (Buntzman & Parker, 2008). In addition, some employees’ perceptions indicated that recognition and rewards did not improve the desire to attain the organizational mission and values (Buntzman & Parker, 2008).

Conclusion

Overall, Culbert is extremely assumptive and opinionated about the performance review process. The contents of his book are not based on fully substantiated or researched facts. This point notwithstanding, Culbert’s experiences as a manager who conducted performance reviews with his employees are related from his perspective but not supported by formal research. The focus is not about the performance review content so much as who rates and explains the review to the employee.

Therein is where I find my research aligns with Culbert’s opinion: The delivery of feedback is extremely important—but more so, the content of the performance review makes a difference between a leader talking AT an employee versus talking WITH an employee. Therefore, I desire to witness a change from the antiquated performance review document with
the bland expectations to a new document that can offer two-way feedback; that is, what does the leader see from a strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat (SWOT) perspective of the employee’s performance, and what does the employee see from a personal SWOT perspective. Those two views are important in the performance review process; however, a clear, non-discriminatory guide must exist to help create dialogue toward employee improvement based on the organizational mission and vision.

Therefore, I also disagree with Culbert’s statement that, “By the end of the book, you’ll be calling for their [performance review] end” (p. 14); I do not agree because this suggestion is impractical, as it pertains to ensuring employees know where they stand when it comes to job expectations (Welch & Welch, 2005); where employee strengths help meet the organizational mission and vision, in addition to the goals of employees; and where employees can improve, in both regards. Instead, I agree with modifying the performance review process from the one-size-fits-all, antiquated review to a newer, individual contribution-based review with altruistic and intrinsic measurement. Measuring more than just the basic job expectations and learning about employees’ personal goals (Conzelmann, 2021) can open the dialogue and bring about the respectful, meaningful conversations Culbert suggests should happen during performance reviews or his suggested previews.

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