Take a moment to reflect on your organization’s performance evaluation process. How formal is it? Does it involve standard written forms and a grading element? Is it done once a year or more often? Are pay raises linked to it? Does it require the signatures of the appraiser and the appraisee? Does a copy go into a personnel file? Has human resources assumed the role of the process police, sending out regular reminders to ensure the process is completed?

For most organizations, the answer is “yes” to the majority of these questions. In reviewing resources from the top experts in performance appraisals, I found that:

- More than 90 percent of performance appraisal systems are unsuccessful. The people involved at all levels of the process dislike it, question its value, and often avoid it. Most organizations go through continuous cycles of “reengineering” their performance appraisal processes, but generally only produce minor variations on the same theme.
- The traditional performance appraisal system represents a long-standing ritual that is more concerned with activity than results. We find ourselves more concerned with filling out all the forms on time than trying to measure the impact the process has on the overall performance of the organization.
- Most organizations are unclear as to exactly what they hope their performance appraisal system will accomplish and often expect it to serve multiple, contradictory purposes.
- When linked to pay, performance appraisals do little to further motivate those few who receive the highest pay raises, but become strong demotivators, at least temporarily, for the majority receiving smaller raises. Pay-for-performance systems often teach employees how to “work the system” rather than “improve the system.”
- Judging people is an inherently subjective process, inevitably influenced by the biases of the judge. The process grades individuals against one another, which undermines effective teamwork. One person’s performance cannot be evaluated in a vacuum, independent of other co-workers and the influences of the total system.

We cannot simply look for a simple, painless way to tolerate or short-cut the performance appraisal process. As Tom Coens and Mary Jenkins note in their book Abolishing Performance Appraisals: Why They Backfire and What To Do Instead, we need to sincerely evaluate the helpful and harmful effects of the organization’s appraisal process and fix it by “transforming your work culture and people systems to garner greater commitment and alignment with your organizational vision, values, and goals.”

Transforming your work culture is the topic of a CFaR research project I conducted in 2003. I discovered healthy work cultures—the cultures of highly successful organizations—consistently worked hard at aligning what they espoused in terms of vision, values, and principles with their actions as defined by processes, practices, and procedures.

I helped write the 2004 guide Principles of the Bryn Mawr College Workplace, which states that Bryn Mawr “sustains a culture that models integrity, which embraces individuality and independence of mind, while fostering a sense of belonging to the whole.” That very first critical principle of integrity—walking the talk—has proven to be quite challenging. One of the primary areas where we found our actions misaligned with our workplace principles document was our historically-based, frequently tweaked,
Recommended Books on Performance Appraisals

- Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest by Peter Block
- First, Break All The Rules: What The World’s Greatest Managers Do Differently by Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman
- Abolishing Performance Appraisals: Why They Backfire and What To Do Instead by Tom Coens and Mary Jenkins
- Out Of The Crisis by W. Edwards Deming
- Coaching: Evoking Excellence In Others by James Flaherty
- Performance Appraisals Don’t Work by Susan M. Heathfield
- Punished by Rewards by Alfie Kohn
- Catalytic Coaching: The End Of The Performance Review by Garold L. Markle
- The Human Side of Enterprise by Douglas McGregor
- Don’t Redesign Your Company’s Performance Appraisal System: Scrap It! by Fred Nichols

örtional approach to performance appraisal.

Shortly after my participating in writing the Bryn Mawr workplace guide, I was on an action team tasked with revamping another performance appraisal system at the college. However, this time the team started by asking: Why do we have a performance appraisal system? And, how and to whom does it add value? Our efforts to answer these questions shifted our thinking from performance appraisal to a broader concept of performance management.

In the end, our team resolved that the most effective approaches to performance management embraced three characteristics:

- A continuous, timely, frequent, two-way communication process
- A process focused on the future rather than on the past
- A process where employees direct and monitor their own work—where they are primarily responsible for their own growth and performance

To generate this culture change, Bryn Mawr has completely eliminated its traditional performance appraisal process and is adopting Gary Markle’s program of catalytic coaching. Markle defines catalytic coaching as:

“... a comprehensive, integrated performance management system built on a paradigm of development. Its purpose is to enable individuals to improve their pro-

duction capabilities and rise to their potential, ultimately causing organizations to generate better business results. It features clearly defined infrastructure, methodology and skill sets. It assigns responsibility for career development to employees and establishes the boss as developmental coach.”

Bryn Mawr is courageously implementing this bold and new performance management process this year. Our hope is to successfully bring out the best in people by setting them up to succeed through the creation of a work environment where employees regularly tap their potential and make contributions of value to the organization.

So I ask you again—What is your appraisal of performance appraisal? If your process does not get high ratings, then a culture adjustment may be in order.