Effects of Accurate and Inflated Employee Performance Self-Evaluations on Memory Accuracy

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Michelle E. Miller
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Effects of Performance Evaluations on Memory

Abstract

Previous research has emphasized the value of carrying out performance appraisals at work. Both employers and employees can benefit from utilizing such measurement tools (Huselid, 1995). While conducting performance appraisals is critical to the success of an organization, companies must also be wary of the misinformation effect and the impact it can have on different parts of an appraisal, especially an employee’s self-evaluation. Due to the lack of existing research on the memory for self-evaluations, I designed the present study to identify the effects of both accurate and inflated self-evaluations on memories for the original event. After watching a video describing an employee’s work performance and reading a self-evaluation written by that same employee, participants rated the employee’s performance based exclusively on the video. Participants’ memory was then tested one week later to determine if the misleading information resulted in any alterations in memory for the original event. Although the results were not significant, the inflated self-evaluation did produce a slight increase in positive ratings over time, providing potential support for the hypothesis. Future implications and current study limitations are also discussed.
Effects of Accurate and Inflated Employee Performance Self-Evaluations on Memory Accuracy

Performance appraisals are often carried out in the workplace to provide management with a tool that measures an employee’s contributions to the organization, while also producing important information about other aspects such as training, promotions, employer/employee relationships, and compensation (Selden, Sherrier, and Wooters, 2012). Appraisals also give managers the opportunity to provide their associates with important feedback to continually improve productivity and efficiency. Multisource feedback has also proven to be beneficial for many organizations in the United States (Selden, Sherrier, and Wooters, 2012). The aim of a 360-degree performance appraisal is to increase the understanding of the employee’s strengths and weaknesses by presenting feedback about managerial actions, leadership, and skills from subordinates, coworkers, various managers and customers (Ostroff, Atwater, and Feinberg, 2004). Without a valid measurement of an employee’s performance, one could not be expected to grow or improve within their company.

Previous research has indicated that individuals are largely motivated to receive positive feedback on aspects that pertain to a specific context or situation (O’Malley and Levy, 2007). Employees often desire positive feedback, especially when it is consistent with the context of their specific job tasks and responsibilities. According to Anseel, Lievens, and Schollaert (2009), an improvement in performance after favorable feedback has been provided to an employee can be expected in numerous situations. Based on these previous findings regarding positive feedback and performance appraisals, it is
reasonable to predict that employees would not hesitate to give themselves an overly inflated positive self-evaluation.

Performance appraisals have also been suggested as a tool for businesses to use as a way to build trust within their organization (Mayer and Davis, 1999). It is essential for the success of a company that the relationship between an employer and their employees is professional and fair. Not only do performance appraisals reveal overall effectiveness and usefulness to the company, they also help predict turnover intentions and organizational behavior (Erdogan, 2003). Businesses are increasingly looking for the newest and most effective ways to maximize their associates’ production in an effort to save both time and money. In order for a company to achieve the greatest amount of high-quality production, their measurement tools must be deemed valid and reasonable by everyone involved. A justified performance appraisal is necessary to produce the desired information that can help determine whether both the employee and the organization are meeting expectations (Erdogan, 2003). A significant amount of time, money, and energy is continuously applied to identifying whether a given person and a particular company are a good fit for each other.

The effect of evaluations on overall performance over time depends upon what participants remember about the original evaluations, yet little research has been conducted on memory for such evaluations. DeNisi and Peters (1996) looked at if structured diary keeping and structured recall could change the way performance information is organized in memory. Results showed that participants had a more positive attitude toward performance appraisals, gave more accurate ratings, and were better able to recall the information after undergoing the interventions (DeNisi and Peters, 1996).
Given that little data exists specifically on memory for performance appraisals over time, other memory paradigms, such as the misinformation effect, can be used to help predict what will happen in these particular situations. According to Belli (1989) the misinformation effect is when ambiguous or deceptive information that has been presented after an event hinders retrieval of the initial event information. Loftus (1992) has done extensive research on the misinformation effect and has emphasized that the passage of time allows the original memories to diminish, which causes the memories to become modified. Altered memories can then directly impact one’s future judgments regarding the original event.

Exposure to misinformation comes in many forms in everyday life that can dramatically alter our memories for an event. Even if one has personally witnessed the event in question, suggestive techniques and misleading statements made afterwards pertaining to the situation can distort the original memory (Loftus, 2005). As a dynamic and social environment, the workplace is especially subject to various types of misinformation. Ranging from vague details to inaccurate claims, misleading information has the potential to infiltrate almost every aspect of the work environment. Performance appraisals are particularly vulnerable when threatened with altered information or inadequate communication. In actuality, one could predict that performance appraisals are one of the aspects that are most susceptible to misinformation because of their subjective nature.

In this study, misinformation was presented to the participants in the form of a positively inflated evaluation written by the employee about their own work performance. Previous research indicates that there is a desire for positive reflections on one’s self-
concept, indicating that it is not uncommon for people to overinflate their performances (O’Malley and Levy, 2010). The effects of this misinformation are expected to alter participants’ memory for the original performance presented via a brief video.

Several studies have already identified the importance of performance appraisals and self-evaluations in the workplace; however, the long-term accuracy of memory by outside parties for these appraisals has yet to be explored. Findings from this research can be applied to real-life situations throughout various organizations pertaining to whether an overly inflated positive self-evaluation can stand the test of time. The alternative is that the accurate information will surface in the ratings once an extended amount of time has passed, indicating that the misinformation presented did not have an impact on memory.

Method

Participants

A total of 46 participants (9 men, 37 women) were recruited through an online participant management system at Butler University. All of the participants were Butler University students ranging in ages from 18 to 22 ($M = 20.1$, $SD = 1.34$). All participants were compensated with either an hour of extra credit in a psychology class or a $10 Starbucks gift card.

Design

This study used a $2 \times 2$ design with employee self-evaluation (presence of misinformation vs. accurate) as a between-subjects variable and evaluation trial (Session 1 vs. Session 2) as a within-subjects variable. The dependent variable was evaluations of the employee based on the information presented in the video.
Procedure

Once informed consent was obtained, we instructed the participants to read the directions displayed on the computer screen, which explained that they would be watching a video, reading a self-evaluation, and answering questions about the employee based on the information presented in the video. Session 1 began with a brief video lasting approximately three minutes showing a college admissions counselor describing her daily tasks and responsibilities. The employee in the video also included some of her statistics and accomplishments from the past year as well as some goals she had set for herself in the future (See Appendix A). After the video, participants read a performance self-evaluation allegedly written by the employee they had just seen in the video (See Appendix B). Participants read either accurate or an inflated self-evaluation depending upon the condition to which they had been randomly assigned. Next, participants answered 10 questions designed specifically for this study about the employee’s performance strictly based on the video they had seen at the beginning of the session (See Appendix C). Upon completion of the 10-item questionnaire, the participants were given the first half of their compensation and filled out some basic demographic information (name, age, email, and gender) to help identify the characteristics of the participants. In order to maintain confidentiality, participants were assigned a participant number, which was used to identify all of their materials and data. Their names were not matched with their participant numbers and their data was labeled only with their participant number, which did not contain any identifying information (i.e., participant's initials, student ID number, etc.). Lastly, participants were given directions for Session 2.
The second session began exactly one week after the first session and was administered by email. Participants were given an invitation code that granted them access to the second questionnaire in order to complete the study. The second 10-item questionnaire consisted of similar questions to the first questionnaire; however, they were worded and ordered differently to prevent the participants from attempting to answer in a manner consistent with their responses from Session 1 (See Appendix D). Participants had approximately 24 hours to complete the second questionnaire. After submitting the questionnaire, the participants received the second half of their compensation and were debriefed via email.

Results

Exclusion Criteria

A total of four participants were excluded from data analyses because they failed to complete the online questionnaire that took place during the second session. Additionally, one participant was not included in the data analyses because the individual did not complete the second online questionnaire within the allotted 24-hour timeframe, which could have potentially resulted in an inaccurate representation in memory due to the extended amount of time that had passed.

Performance Ratings

Figure 1 shows the change in average performance ratings given by participants in both the accurate and inflated self-evaluation conditions from Session 1 to Session 2. The ten items were averaged to produce an overall rating for each participant, which reliably demonstrated the positive or negative opinion about the employee's performance. Participants in the accurate self-evaluation condition on average rated the employee comparably both at Session 1 ($M = 3.28$, $SD = .32$) and at Session 2 ($M = 3.29$, $SD = .32$).
Participants in the inflated self-evaluation condition rated the employee more positively at Session 2 ($M = 3.41, SD = .42$) than at Session 1 ($M = 3.26, SD = .42$). These results did show a trend for some support for the hypothesis that participants are more likely to positively remember an inflated display of performance than an accurate evaluation, even when the employee was somebody other than themselves.

A mixed-model ANOVA was performed with self-evaluation (accurate vs. inflated) as the between-subjects factor and test (Session 1 vs. Session 2) as the within-subjects factor. The main effect for accuracy of the self-evaluation did not reach significance, $F (1, 44) = 0.24, \text{MSE} = 0.24, p = .625, \eta^2 = .01$, indicating that participants in the inflated self-evaluation condition did view the employee more positively according to the information presented in the video at the beginning of the first session. The main effect of time was non-significant, Wilks' $\lambda = .92, F (1, 44) = 3.82, p = .057, \eta^2 = .08$; however, the data shows a slight increase in scores from Session 1 ($M = 3.23, SD = .37$) to Session 2 ($M = 3.35, SD = .38$).

The interaction between accuracy of self-evaluation and time was also non-significant, Wilks' $\lambda = .93, F (1, 44) = 3.24, p = .079, \eta^2 = .07$. Ratings for the inflated self-evaluations did increase over time, while the ratings for the accurate self-evaluations did not increase over time. Participants were slightly more likely to rate the employee higher in performance after they had read an inflated appraisal than when they read an accurate performance appraisal.
Figure 1. Average change in performance ratings from Time 1 to Time 2.

Discussion

Previous studies show the significance of conducting performance appraisals within the workplace as well as the weight they hold in making important decisions for the company. Management relies on the information provided by performance appraisals and self-evaluations to expand and continuously improve the company culture and environment. Multiple sources of feedback provide benefits that cannot be overlooked when it comes to the success and reputation of an organization. Some of the main aspects directly affected by reviewing performance appraisals are promotion recommendations, training development and program changes, salary increases, employee relations and development, and internal position transfers (Belli, 1989). However, numerous Human Resource managers and professionals reported that the main objective of completing a performance appraisal is to be able to provide feedback to an employee. One other dimension is the impact on employee motivation, although this aspect is rarely
considered among some of the most relevant uses of performance appraisals (Cleveland, Murphy, and Williams, 1989).

Several studies have identified the importance of performance appraisals and self-evaluations in the workplace; however, the long-term accuracy of memory by outside parties for these appraisals has hardly been explored. Findings from this study can be applied to real-life situations throughout various organizations pertaining to whether an overly inflated positive self-evaluation can continue to influence memories and behaviors for an extended period of time. The alternative is that the accurate information will surface in the ratings once an extended amount of time has passed, indicating that the misinformation presented did not have an impact on memory.

Performance appraisals have continuously been evolving over time as the demands and expectations of employees are constantly changing. What was once simply a report that one manager completed regarding one employee has dramatically transformed into an elaborate review process often carried out by several evaluators. Many companies have remained up-to-date with the changes and continue to implement the use of a number of feedback sources to achieve a complete and accurate assessment of the associate’s work performance (Fletcher, 2001). However, there are also some negatives to using performance appraisals. According to Cleveland, Murphy, and Williams (1989), when performance appraisals are reviewing multiple objectives, many often become overlooked. The main objective is what often sticks out in the evaluator’s mind and will then be the emphasis on which the rater makes most of their decisions about that employee. Additional purposes are ignored devaluing the performance appraisal as a whole (Cleveland, Murphy, and Williams, 1989).
The 360-degree performance appraisal is known for providing some of the most extensive feedback about a current employee. This type of evaluation consults not just supervisors, but also coworkers, peers, and customers to retrieve all of the necessary information (Albright and Levy, 1995). One of the most beneficial aspects of the 360-degree feedback appraisal is the extent to which it informs associates of their greatest strengths and weaknesses with the organization. Such information can lead to great improvement and success for both the employee and the company if applied appropriately. Employer and supervisor biases are also reduced to a minimum with the 360-degree performance appraisal (Albright and Levy, 1995). With the increased number of raters, there are expectations that the employee is receiving a fair and thorough assessment. A self-evaluation is one piece of a 360-degree performance appraisal that is designed to counter any biases from other evaluators.

A 360-degree performance appraisal also includes an employee’s reflection on their own work, produced in the form of a self-evaluation. Little research has been conducted on the impact of an employee’s self-evaluation on the overall perception of their performance and review of the appraisal thus far. Concerning goal-setting behavior and motivation, Erez and Judge (2001) found that employees with positive self-evaluations tend to also have higher goal-setting behavior and more motivation in the workplace. Those that had positive self-evaluations also in turn were more likely to be better task performers than other employees with negative self-evaluations (Erez and Judge, 2001). Findings such as these also lend support to the claim that employees are inclined to overly inflate their performances in an effort to promote motivation and goal-setting behavior.
Driven by existing goals and motivations, positively inflated self-evaluations reported by employees are one of the primary ways that performance appraisals can be contaminated by the misinformation effect. According to results found by Vornik, Sharman, and Garry (2003), misleading postevent information can significantly alter memories for the original event, especially depending upon the source of the inaccurate information. Those who are considered to be high in power regarding the situation are more likely to successfully mislead others that are exposed to the postevent information (Vornik, Sharman, and Garry, 2003). Further research could look at the perceived power an employee carries pertaining to their own performance appraisal, which can then be applied to how likely others are to be influenced by the employee's self-evaluation.

Furthermore, future research can look at the differences produced when the self-evaluation is presented to the participants visually compared to verbally. The current study only presented the self-evaluation to the participants visually, possibly creating a bias or even a disadvantage. If an individual held a preference for reviewing information visually rather than verbally, they could have had an advantage in remembering the information accurately. De Beni and Moe (2003) found results supporting the idea that individuals may be more likely to remember information depending on the context and presentation modality. Participants that scored high on imagery-ability were more likely to remember items presented visually, whereas participants with low imagery-ability preferred items that were presented verbally (De Beni and Moe, 2003) With a piece as complex as performance appraisals, and particularly self-evaluations, it is reasonable to hypothesize that information presented verbally might produce more accurate memories than that same information presented visually.
One limitation of this study is the small sample size and amount of data collected. It is possible that if more participants had been recruited statistically significant results could have been reached. More specifically, the sample size was predominantly female. A bigger and more diverse population could have provided more power to yield some significant results. Another limitation to the current study is the quality of the materials used to portray an employee and their self-evaluation. Due to limited time and resources, the video was recorded in the same lab area as the one that participants were tested, and it would not be difficult for the participants to notice that some of the equipment in the lab is also used in the video. This limitation could lower the experimental realism of the study and take away from the how convincing the actress was in the video as an employee that was actually providing information about her own on-the-job performance. Specifically, this could have led the participants to disregard important pieces of information in the video or ignore the video altogether, potentially producing skewed results. One final limitation is the level of experience students have with administering and interpreting performance appraisals. It is not common or expected for students to have much exposure to appraisals or self-evaluations, so this could have affected how they were evaluating the employee. Since they have not been trained on how to review an evaluation, the participants’ results might not have been reflective of results obtained from the general population that could have more experience with performance appraisals.

As discussed and shown in several previous studies, performance appraisals are nearly invaluable to a reputable organization. The information a valid and reliable performance appraisal can provide a number of benefits for a business including
identification of an employee’s strengths and weaknesses, measurements to help
determine warranted salary increases, position promotions, and additional leadership
roles, and improvement of current training and development programs. They also help
outline the status of an employer’s relationship with their associates, hold businesses
accountable to their culture and policies, and promote trust within a company to help
build future relationships. With how influential performance appraisals are, it is pivotal
that the information presented within them is accurate and relevant to the context and
situation regarding the employee and their on-the-job performance.
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Hello, my name is Claire Jackson, and I am a freshman admission counselor for a small, private university in Indianapolis. I have been working as an admission counselor for a total of six years, and I have held my position at this university for three years. My recruitment territory includes Lake, Porter, and Laporte Counties in northwest Indiana. This year, we enrolled a total of 865 freshmen from all over the country, which is up from a total of 839 from last year. Although our total enrollment has increased since last year, my numbers have slightly decreased. For the 2012-2013 school year, I recruited 109 freshmen, which was the most in school history from that territory. However, this year I only recruited 90 freshmen for the incoming class. I am also the lead counselor of our diversity recruitment team. Diversity is especially important to promote a well-rounded education from a liberal arts school. The continuous goal of the university is to increase our diversity percentage with each new school year. Last year, our diversity percentage increased to 26%, but it has remained at that percentage for this year. We’re hoping to increase it to at least 30% by the beginning of the next school year. Overall, the university is becoming more selective and competitive as a whole. The average high school GPA and SAT scores have slightly increased with this year’s incoming freshman class. One other positive event that resulted from this year’s recruitment cycle was the implementation of an improved “Prospective Freshman Visit Day.” In the past, this day has consisted of shadowing a current student in their designated major and having lunch in the student union with a faculty member. Now the prospective students have the option to stay overnight in a sample dorm room, attend a university sporting event, and engage
in an example advising appointment in addition to the previous options. This new program proved to be highly successful with over 300 prospective students taking advantage of the new opportunities. I am especially proud of this success because I am one of two freshman counselors who helped redesign the visit day program. I am happy with the way this year’s recruitment cycle turned out, and I look forward to helping the freshmen settle in to their new home.
Appendix B

Self-Evaluations

Accurate

Overall, I believe I have demonstrated satisfactory work in my position this year. Although my recruitment numbers were not as high this year as they were last year, I still believe that I was able to recruit a large number of students from my territory. One thing that I think I did particularly well with was the redesign of the “Prospective Freshman Visit Day.” Before the new options were added to the program this year, the success rate for these days was very low. Last year, the students seemed uninterested and bored on their visit days. I have gotten exceptional feedback from students that attended the event this year, and we plan to keep these changes for next year’s program. One area that I believe I could improve on was increasing our diversity percentage. While our diversity numbers did not decrease, they also did not increase meaning that we did not meet our goal for this year. Next year we plan to put more funding into diversity recruitment and hopefully come up with a new welcome packet that highlights our diverse student population. I am proud of my accomplishments for this year, and also recognize that there are a few areas that I still need to improve upon for next year.
Inflated

Overall, I believe I demonstrated exceptional work in my position this year. My recruitment numbers were very high from my territory, which is very similar to the past three years I have been here. I was able to recruit students with the highest GPA and SAT scores for this year’s class. The redesigned “Prospective Freshman Visit Day” was a huge success. Before the new options were added to the program this year, the success rate for these days was very low. I received no complaints about any aspect of the program and feel that we have perfected this event for the students. Our diversity percentage stayed the same, which is something to be celebrated. It is incredibly difficult to recruit more diverse students, so I am pleased that we were able to maintain our numbers for this year. Next year we plan to put more funding into diversity recruitment and hopefully come up with a new welcome packet that highlights our diverse student population. I am extremely proud of the work I have performed so far this year and cannot point out any specific areas that I need to improve upon for next year.
Appendix C

Session 1 Questionnaire

Please answer the following ten questions based on the information you saw in the video at the beginning of this study by circling your response.

1.) Claire Jackson, the employee shown in the video, met all of the university’s goals with this year’s recruitment cycle.

   Strongly Agree   Agree   Neither Agree nor Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

2.) Claire Jackson recognizes some of the areas she needs to improve upon in her position.

   Strongly Agree   Agree   Neither Agree nor Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

3.) Claire Jackson recruited just as many students from her territory this year as she did last year.

   Strongly Agree   Agree   Neither Agree nor Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

4.) The new “Prospective Freshman Visit Day” program was greatly improved with Claire’s help.
5.) Claire went above and beyond her duties as a freshman admission counselor this year.

6.) Claire provided her manager with an accurate self evaluation of her performance this year.

7.) As a freshman admission counselor, Claire has shown continuous improvement through her job performance.

8.) According to Claire, the diversity percentage should increase with each passing year.
9.) This year’s freshman class has recorded the highest average GPA and SAT scores in the university’s history.

10.) Claire has exaggerated her success at recruiting from her territory for this year.
Appendix D

Session 2 Questionnaire

Please answer the following ten questions based on the information you saw in the video at the beginning of this study by circling your response.

1.) Claire Jackson recognized some of the areas she needs to improve upon in her position.

   Strongly Agree   Agree   Neither Agree nor Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree
   Disagree

2.) Claire Jackson recruited just as many students from her territory this year as she did last year.

   Strongly Agree   Agree   Neither Agree nor Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree
   Disagree

3.) Claire Jackson, the employee shown in the video, met all of the university’s goals with this year’s recruitment cycle.

   Strongly Agree   Agree   Neither Agree nor Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree
   Disagree

4.) Claire went above and beyond her duties as a freshman admission counselor this year.
5.) The new “Prospective Freshman Visit Day” program was greatly improved with Claire’s help.

6.) As a freshman admission counselor, Claire has shown continuous improvement through her job performance.

7.) Claire provided her manager with an accurate self evaluation of her performance this year.

8.) According to Claire, the diversity percentage should increase with each passing year.
9.) Claire has exaggerated her success at recruiting from her territory for this year.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Neither Agree nor Disagree  Disagree  Strongly
Disagree

10.) This year’s freshman class has recorded the highest average GPA and SAT scores in the university’s history.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Neither Agree nor Disagree  Disagree  Strongly
Disagree