

**An electronic questionnaire is far  
from a personal dialogue  
Further reflections on professional  
Appraisals**

**David Zigmond**

**© 2015**

## Re: Competence or compliance? – further reflections

I am grateful for Dr Kishor Vasant's response to my article<sup>1</sup>. In his brief blog he makes several points: each indicates well the complexity of our problem.

1. He refers to 'electronic online tools [of Appraisal being] reasonably flexible.'

But reasonable to whom?

My argument is the reverse: it is that the elaboration of the complex electronic Appraisal Toolkit has become incrementally more burdensomely *inflexible* – more procedural and densely packed. The consequence is an increasing abstraction from the very realities we are trying to address. Even if this is administratively expedient it loses our human sense and sensibility with the appraised – the procedure's yield degrades to the officious: desiccated shells of compliance, not intelligent views of competence.

A mandatory and itemised questionnaire tells us something very different from a candid, colleagueial dialogue. A proffered answer is not a conversation.

2. He refers to my 'seeming to be questioning the probity of all appraisers ...'

I am sorry that I have not been clearer, and thus have been misconstrued. My position is very different and rather more serious: any doubt and antipathy have never been personal. All my Appraisers have been personally courteous and diplomatically helpful – but year on year I have seen how the evolving electronic system of interrogation and task-setting has reduced their latitude to make wise discriminations. So it is that we have lost our more authentic and fruitful dialogues: 'I know it makes no sense, but just do it ... we've all got to' has actually been said to me, and on more than one occasion.

So, I have no personal criticism of Appraisers, but I do have very substantial critique of the system – the Appraisal Toolkit – that has become so cumbrously hegemonic. Good individuals are inevitably compromised by bad systems – that is one definition of a bad system. In these we all become victims, perpetrators or bystanders ... or opponents. The last is a more autonomous but hazardous choice, and one I am making now.

3. He asks if a different Appraiser would help?

No. Changing my Appraiser merely parries the more important problem. I am instead urging direct and candid debate about the unintended consequences of this kind of formulaic, electronic human processing: *Technototalitarianism*.<sup>2</sup> For those of us not yet in serious trouble, we need something much lighter, leaner and more humanly responsive; more dextrous and intelligently discriminating.

It is the loss of such interchanges – our dumbing down – that is seriously devitalising and stupefying our profession now. Electronically mediated Appraisals are instrumental to this.

4. Lastly his appeal for ‘useful constructive suggestions’.

Yes, I have many – but they are about restoring our live and difficult human discourses, not replacing them by ever-expanding procedures of electronic informatics and control.

Encouragingly, this exchange could be one small step in that direction.

-----0-----

1 *Competence or Compliance? The Corrosive cost of professional practitioner appraisals*. BMJ Blog 25.9.15

2 *Edward: Shot in His Own Interest: Technototalitarianism and the fragility of the therapeutic dance*. *Journal of Holistic Healthcare* Volume 2, issue 4, November 2005