

Abstract

After beginning work with DHR Construction as a subcontractor, James Kennison is asked to join the firm as a site foreman. This decision was taken by the company's partners, who thought that Kennison was an ideal fit for the job. However, this theory did not play out well in practice, and Kennison's poor results prompted the partners to conduct an evaluative appraisal interview with Kennison to find out what was going wrong. Readers must assess the evaluation model used and suggest improvements and alternatives.

Case

DHR Construction was managed by Richard Davis, operating manager and senior partner. Homes were built on-demand to customer specifications. Richard Davis was in charge of the financial management of the firm including working with suppliers, creditors, and subcontractors (obtaining bids and construction loans). Davis and Richard Hodgetts, the general partner, met on a weekly basis and communicated through phone calls and e-mail. The role of project foreman was delegated to either one of their subcontractors or a hired employee and, in the worst-case scenario, filled by a reluctant Hodgetts (who had a full-time job outside of the business and had minimal free time).

DHR earned a reputation for honesty, promptness in paying bills, and professionalism—rare commodities for a small home builder in the area. However, DHR was also very demanding of suppliers—if you promised a job was going to be completed or supplies were going to be delivered by a certain date and you did not meet the deadline, you were going to hear from the firm. Repeated miscues would result in not being asked to bid on future projects.

Enter James Kennison

James Kennison was a successful corporate executive who was good with his hands; his main hobby and passion was working on his home. His mild-mannered, laid-back approach to life was perfect for the professional environment of his former firm, MicroTech, a business that produced specialized electronic parts and gauges. Kennison left the corporate world when he became economically self-sufficient in order to simplify his life, reconnect with nature, and become, as he called it, “self-actualized.”

In order to keep busy, Kennison decided that he would put his passion for building to good use and hire himself out as an independent handyman/subcontractor. His aptitude, acumen, and even-tempered style made it very easy for Kennison to fit into any work crew that would hire him. After a few jobs, Kennison decided to work on his own and hired himself out as a finisher on home construction projects. It was in that capacity that Kennison was originally hired by Davis and Hodgetts to work as a subcontractor on the homes in their Mountain Trails project. Kennison's wit, charm, and polished demeanor sat well with Davis and Hodgetts, and he became a fixture at their weekly business meetings.

It was not surprising, then, that Davis and Hodgetts approached Kennison about taking over the position of contractor/foreman when a sudden vacancy occurred. Kennison had a plethora of experience, had a real head for business, and was respected by the other subcontractors as a fellow artisan, one who knew the work and was not afraid to get dirty doing it.

Although Kennison seemed open and honest in his dealings with Davis (with Kennison consistently indicating that all was going well), it didn't take more than a month before Davis realized that all was not going as planned.

Davis's Gantt chart indicated that several homes were falling behind schedule with one of the homes failing inspection.

Evaluative Appraisal Interview: Cracks in the Drywall?

Davis and Hodgetts talked about the situation at some length and decided that both of them needed to talk with Kennison at the next dinner meeting and find out exactly what was happening at the job site since Kennison hadn't commented on work delays or problems with the inspectors. At the meeting, Davis reiterated to Kennison what he thought were the job responsibilities, the important tasks to be accomplished, and the need to have open and candid communications between them. Kennison admitted that getting subcontractors to show up as scheduled was starting to become a problem and that he thought that the construction inspections would be quickly dealt with. He apologized for the delays and said that he would keep in better contact with Davis and let him know exactly what was happening, especially if there were any new problems. Davis reminded Kennison that he needed to keep a close watch on the subcontractors since they had a tendency to work for multiple builders simultaneously and therefore would jump from job to job. Kennison assured Davis and Hodgetts that he would manage the situation and that things would improve.

The talk with Kennison seemed to get things back on track. Kennison provided Davis with a list of the subcontractors to invite to their dinner meetings. When the issue was raised with these subcontractors about work scheduling, the subcontractors promised to do the best they could to perform the work as required. The next few days saw a flurry of activity at the work site as the subcontractors, guided by Kennison, tried to catch up with the construction schedule. The next inspection came off without a hitch.

Here's to the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss

After a few days, the subcontractors were back to their old routine of not showing up at the work site when planned. After a few weeks went by, Kennison tried to cover for the work not being done by the subcontractors but to no avail. The situation deteriorated when one of the home purchasers, who visited the work site, reported to Davis that their home was way behind schedule. After a quick talk with Kennison, several of the subcontractors had to be fired by Davis because they continued to not show up when scheduled without notification. Worse, now other subcontractors (e.g. painters) were quitting because the homes were not ready to work on.

Discussion Questions

1. What appraisal method best describes how Davis and Hodgetts evaluated Kennison's work?
2. Given your answer to Question 1, why do you believe that this method of appraisal did not produce long-lasting results in Kennison's ability to manage the subcontractors?
3. Assume that you are Davis and Hodgetts. What appraisal system would you use for Kennison? Why?
4. Discuss "who" evaluated and "who" should be evaluating Kennison's performance. Explain why.