

Who Fills Out Your Performance Appraisal?



Most people would agree that managers display different styles. Did you ever wonder if their style differences extended to include the way they approach, fill out and conduct performance appraisals? Based on what I've seen over the years, I think there are four basic styles. These styles link to the degree the appraiser in question is mainly self-directed, other-directed, or some mix of the two. As the matrix in Figure 1 shows, the four styles are Slugs, Slaves, Rebels and Citizens.

- **Slugs** are passive people who take little or no initiative on their own nor are they very responsive to direction from others. They move slowly if at all.
- **Slaves**, as the term implies, take most of their direction from others and, feeling more or less powerless, display little initiative of their own. But they harbor anger and resentment.
- **Rebels** act mainly in accordance with their own notions of what is right and appropriate. They single-mindedly pursue their own initiatives and that often brings them into conflict with others.
- **Citizens** do a good job of balancing and integrating the guidance and directions they receive from others with their own views and beliefs about the proper way of doing things. They can be counted on to give it their best.

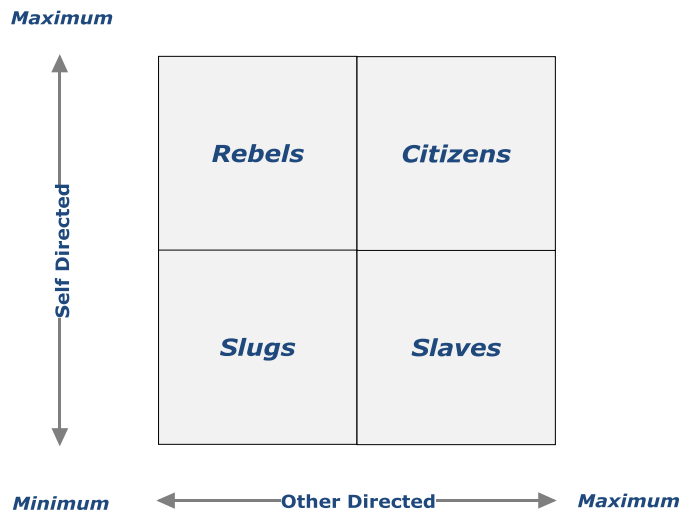


Figure 1 - Slugs, Slaves, Rebels & Citizens

These four styles display very different approaches to performance appraisal. Descriptions follow:

1. **The Slug Approach.** This approach is marked by the seeming inability of the appraiser to complete the necessary forms and interviews in a complete, timely and professional manner. In some settings, this shows up as extreme tardiness; in others, the appraiser simply never gets around to it until threatened first by HR and then by his or her boss (who has also been threatened by HR). The forms and interviews are themselves characterized by a minimum amount of effort and are of extremely poor quality.
2. **The Slave Approach.** This approach is one where the appraiser blindly follows company guidelines and procedures, up to and including the incorporation of recommended words and phrases and ensuring that the distribution of ratings (if ratings are used) satisfy whatever statistical requirements (e.g., mean, median, mode and distribution) might be imposed. The forms and interviews pass muster so to speak, but although they meet the letter of the standards, they do not fulfill their spirit.

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3. **The Rebel Approach.** Here, the appraiser despises performance appraisal systems and simply refuses to go along with the program. He (or she) shows no interest in writing others' appraisals; indeed, the appraisees are often asked to write their own appraisals and to assign their own ratings as well as indicate their own merit increase. They are also asked to take the lead in discussions of their performance. Surprisingly, the resulting forms and interviews are of uniform and unusually high quality (it seems appraisees really do care about their appraisals).
4. **The Citizen Approach.** Under this approach, the appraiser is a good corporate citizen and strives to do the best job possible under the circumstances (which might or might not favor a realistic and useful appraisal of performance). The forms and interviews reflect honesty, candor and an attempt to be helpful, although they are constrained by many factors beyond the appraiser's control (see the requirements listed under the slave heading above).

As someone receiving a performance appraisal, it's worth your while to pay attention to the style of the person preparing and conducting yours. Why? Because, depending on the style of your appraiser, you can do different things to influence your appraisal. If you've got a slug for an appraiser, you might nudge him or her along or lend a helping hand. If your appraiser is a slave to the appraisal system, you might focus on trying to influence the words and other content of your appraisal. If your appraiser is a rebel, rejoice; your appraisal is largely in your own hands. And, if your appraiser is a good corporate citizen, be open, affable and as helpful to the appraiser as you can.

If you're someone who prepares and delivers appraisals, it might benefit you to reflect on your style as an appraiser and perhaps think about changing it.

Finally, if you're in HR, you might consider taking a look at how the styles of those who fill out appraisals in your company are distributed among the four categories described here. Are they mostly good corporate citizens with a few slugs, slaves and rebels? Or are they mostly slaves with a smattering of the others? Whatever the distribution, it will tell you something about performance appraisals beyond what the data tell you.