The Effects of Performance Appraisal on Staff Performance

Steven S. Armstrong
Western Michigan University

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THE EFFECTS OF PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL ON STAFF PERFORMANCE

by

Steven S. Armstrong

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
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Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
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THE EFFECTS OF PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL ON STAFF PERFORMANCE

Steven S. Armstrong, M.A.
Western Michigan University, 1981

Performance appraisals are increasing in numbers, but their effectiveness has little empirical validation. A major objective of the present study was to examine the effects of performance appraisals on the actual performance of supervisees. In addition, it assessed the effect of qualitative, rather than quantitative statements by supervisors. Five staff members participated in this study while working as teaching assistants. Ten dependent variables were observed and recorded per individual, after which the experimenter reviewed the baseline data and targeted six dependent variables for change, based on their low frequencies. The independent variable consisted of a performance appraisal which was a personal interview between the supervisor/experimenter and a supervisee in which the supervisor rated the supervisee on the targeted behaviors. The results indicated an increase in the proportion of tasks completed from 56% in baseline to 91% in intervention. The improvements maintained for three to four weeks, after which performance quickly declined to approximately the same level as in baseline.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my committee Dr. Fulton, Dr. R. W. Malott, and Dr. Lyon for their insightful comments and guidance through this research. More specifically, I would like to thank Dr. R. W. Malott for the system that helped me complete this project and Dr. Fulton for her patient, thorough editing and encouragement. I also want to acknowledge the contribution of Sue Dickerman for the typing, Science Graphics for the figure work, and Mr. and Mrs. W. Scott Armstrong along with Mr. G. P. Shelby for their additional encouragement. Thanks again B.F.

Steven S. Armstrong
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WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY, M.A., 1981

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Performance appraisals are widely used in organizations (Spriegel, 1962), suggesting that they constitute an effective way to influence employees. However, a search of the literature did not reveal evidence of their utility in terms of actual, data-based improvement in employee performance. In fact, Clingenpeel (1962) stated that performance appraisals have such obvious validity that personnel people feel it is unnecessary to conduct formal studies of their effectiveness.

A performance appraisal consists of a supervisor telling a subordinate staff member how well he/she has performed in a variety of areas. These comments may occur too long after the actual behavior has occurred to function as reinforcement or punishment for that behavior, and the comments may occur too long before the next opportunity to emit the behavior to function as discriminative stimuli. Nevertheless, if the appraisal resulted in improvement, some factor influencing employee behavior must have been affected. The analysis of such effects is not simple, and the studies reviewed have often oversimplified or overlooked such an analysis.

Investigators have followed two general methods of inquiry in studying performance appraisals. The first method involves the identification of the relevant features of a good performance appraisal via purely theoretical analyses (e.g., Mayfield, 1960; Nemeroff & Wexley, 1977; Stolz, 1961).
The second method involves the identification of the relevant features by more "empirical" means. This strategy, however, has not been carried out with measures of actual employee behaviors. Instead, investigators typically collect data from the supervisors' verbal ratings of subordinate performance, according to characteristics such as "motivation" or "self-esteem" of subordinates (Clingenpeel, 1962; Cooke & Lang, 1961; Spriegel, 1962; Fletcher, 1963; Fletcher & Williams, 1975; Cummings, 1972). Such studies involved an interview between the supervisor and the subordinate, in which the dependent variable was the supervisor's rating of subordinate performance, before versus after the performance appraisal. However, the behavior of interest to the organization was presumably the actual performance of the subordinate, but this was not directly assessed. Clingenpeel (1962) showed that the supervisor ratings did increase following a one-to-one interview, and suggested that the increase resulted from the appraisal.

Investigators have also looked at appraisal "style". For example, Fletcher and Williams (1975) concluded that when both the subordinate's appropriate and inappropriate behaviors were discussed during the appraisal, there was a greater increase in the supervisor's ratings than when there was either a discussion of only inappropriate behaviors, or only appropriate behaviors. Another study by Fletcher (1973) tested interview style by comparing two different approaches. The first was the "problem-solving" method, in which the supervisor and subordinate discussed all weaknesses of the subordinate's performance. The second style was the "tell and sell" method, in which the supervisor completely dominated the interview, instructing the
subordinate, who had no input. The authors concluded that the problem-solving method evoked the most favorable verbal report from the supervisor about the behavior change of the subordinate.

These studies are typical of the literature to date, with respect to their independent and dependent variables. Of the studies reviewed, none used functionally defined appraisal items — items which are behaviorally defined, easily observed, measured and recorded. Furthermore, no studies actually recorded direct measures of supervisee behavior; but changing the supervisor ratings of workers is not necessarily equivalent to changing the amount or quality of work completed by the supervisees. Thus, an important question remains unanswered. Will performance appraisals function as effective independent variables to influence the actual performance of target tasks?

A major objective of the present study was to examine the effects of performance appraisals on the actual performance of supervisees. Furthermore, it assessed the effects of qualitative statements rather than quantitative data, so that the independent variable in the present study would thus approximate a typical appraisal, in which managers do not actually have quantitative data on each employee behavior appraised. However, the present appraisal was unlike those in most organizations in that it had no direct relation to raises or promotions.
CHAPTER II

Method

Subjects and Setting

Five freshman and sophomore students participated in this study, which took place in a large introductory psychology program, administered by a four-level staff hierarchy of 45 graduate and undergraduate students. The subjects were teaching apprentices (TAs), working as front-line staff, whose tasks consisted primarily of recurring tasks -- both academic and administrative. The teaching apprenticeship was the entry level staff position, and was one four-month semester in duration.

Three subjects worked in a two-hour morning shift and two worked in a two-hour afternoon shift, Monday through Thursday, during which they spent one hour in a classroom and one hour working in the program office. The present study dealt primarily with the recurring tasks which occurred during the office hours, and which were specified in the TAs' staff procedures manual. Prior to the study, the experimenter quizzed subjects over their job specifications and each scored 100%. All five subjects signed informed consent agreements to participate in the research (Appendix A).

Task Definition

There were many recurring tasks required of the subjects on a daily basis, most of which took only minutes to complete, with the
minimum criterion being 93% completion of all tasks in order to receive an A for the apprenticeship, which yielded academic college credit. During both phases, the subjects earned a maximum of two points per day for completion of all daily recurring tasks (e.g., attendance, promptness, quality control, etc.), and lost one point for each task not completed, up to the maximum of two points per day. In addition, they earned a maximum of two points per day for a quiz over the assigned reading material. It was the duty of the staff members from the three upper levels of the hierarchy to observe the TAs and assign points daily. Formal job requirements (duties and their respective points) remained consistent for the subjects throughout both phases of the study.

**Performance Measures**

Ten of the daily recurring tasks constituted the dependent variables, six of which were well below the criterion for a grade of A and four of which were above the criterion, according to the baseline performance. The ten dependent variables observed and recorded were 1) promptness, 2) minutes on task, 3) number of comments during daily staff meetings, 4) grade sheets posted in hall, 5) daily quiz score of at least 90%, 6) gradebook entries up-to-date, 7) appropriate feedback to students on quizzes (i.e., spelling, clarity of written comments), 8) appropriately responding to daily feedback for, 9) withholding negative comments about the system when solving problems, and 10) number of positive interactions with students per opportunity (i.e., smiling, giving praise). The experimenter reviewed
the baseline data and targeted dependent variables one through six for change based on their low frequencies of occurrence. Dependent variables seven through 10 occurred at high frequencies, and the experimenter selected them to insure discussion of desirable, as well as undesirable performance during the performance appraisal.

Performance Appraisal System

The experimenter conducted a performance appraisal with each of the five workers. They received the appraisal according to a multiple-baseline across-groups design, in which one week separated the two interventions. The appraisal was a structured one-to-one interview, facilitated by the use of a script, which consisted of an outline of what the experimenter said to the subject (Appendix B). The script described the subjects' behavior qualitatively on each of the ten behavioral requirements, and its written form aided in consistency across interviews.

The performance appraisal form contained ten general rules which were based on the subjects' job requirements; each general rule was the basis for one specific behavior, which constituted one of the ten dependent variables. For example, the general rule might be "provide the students with prompt feedback", whereas the specific dependent variable would be "grade sheets posted 15 minutes before the hour".

A three-point rating scale followed each general rule on the appraisal form. Prior to the interview, the experimenter rated each dependent variable by circling a number on the scale. To assign an
appropriate rating to the performance, the experimenter used a percentage equivalent rating scale in the following manner: 93-100% task completion equaled a rating of 1, 85-92% equaled a rating of 2, 84% and below equaled a rating of 3, and a rating of ND represented no data (Appendix C). The subjects had no knowledge of the percentage equivalents, and each item on the appraisal received approximately two and one-half minutes of discussion time during the interview.

During the interview, the experimenter had access to the actual baseline data, but the statements in the interview were only qualitative, general statements, consistent with baseline performance. Both experimenter and subject viewed the form, from which the general rule was read, and the subject's performance in that area was then discussed. For instance, the apprentice may have been late for office hours exactly 75% of the time during baseline. The experimenter would note the general rule that workers should always be prompt to office hours, and then say, "I've noticed that you have been late for your office hours a lot. I'd like to see you work on this."

The experimenter informed each subject at the onset of the appraisal that the appraisal form would remain with the experimenter. This was done to test the effectiveness of the appraisal interview alone.

Measurement and Reliability

The experimenter functionally defined all of the dependent variables and trained another supervisor to work as an observer. The
dependent variables were defined in the following manner: 1) promptness: the TA must be in the office no later than one minute past the hour. Violation of this was considered a non-occurrence. 2) Minutes on task: the TA must be actively engaged (reading, writing, grading, discussing) in job-related activities for at least 35 minutes of the office hour; anything less was considered a non-occurrence. This measure was time-sampled once every five minutes. 3) Number of comments during daily office meetings: the TA must have raised at least two points of discussion (job-related) during the daily meetings; anything less was counted as a non-occurrence. 4) Grade sheet posted in hall: the TA must have the grade sheet posted by 15 minutes before the in-class hour; anything after 15 minutes was a non-occurrence. 5) Quiz score: anything less than 90% daily quiz score was considered a non-occurrence. 6) Gradebook up-to-date: all student scores must be entered daily; anytime this did not occur, a non-occurrence was scored. 7) Feedback to students: the TA may not have more than one misspelled word or mistake in grammar per page or a non-occurrence was scored. Any written comments that were not legible were also counted as a non-occurrence. 8) Appropriately responding to daily feedback forms: a TA was considered to have accepted feedback well if he/she filled out all of the daily evaluation forms appropriately. ( Appropriately was defined as checking off one of the preselected categories on the feedback form.) 9) Withholding negative comments: failure to withhold negative comments (profanity or slander to the system) when problem-solving would be scored as a non-occurrence. 10) Positive interactions: failure to give praise or smile would be
scored as a non-occurrence. The experimenter and the second observer collected frequency data through direct measure of permanent products and event recording. The experimenter collected primary data for the morning shift and the second observer collected primary data for the afternoon shift. Reliability observations occurred regularly by having both observers record the same shift simultaneously. Calculations for interobserver agreement yielded 97% overall agreement (number of agreements divided by number of agreements plus number of disagreements, multiplied by 100).
CHAPTER III

Results

The performance appraisal improved performance of all six "low-baseline" tasks, for all five subjects. The results for each group appear in Figure 1, which shows the mean proportion of occurrences across groups for each behavior. There was an immediate increase in eleven of the twelve measures (i.e., six dependent variables for two groups), with the remaining measure increasing one week later. This improvement maintained for three to four weeks, after which ten of the twelve measures quickly declined to approximately the same level as in baseline.

In both groups, the "high-baseline" dependent variables remained at 100% throughout both phases. In baseline, all six low-occurrence dependent variables were below 80% (see Table I). For the six dependent variables, the across-subjects mean proportion of tasks completed ranged from 26% to 75% during baseline, with a median of 56%. For the first three weeks after the appraisal, the same measure ranged from 58% to 94%, with a median of 91%.

Not only was the effect observed for all five subjects combined, but each individual showed dramatic improvement. This improvement for individuals was analyzed by measuring performance across all ten dependent variables for single subjects. As seen in Table II, each individual subject showed an increase in completion of targeted tasks of at least 20% after the appraisal.
Figure 1. Mean proportion of occurrences during baseline and intervention for the six low-occurrence dependent variables. The dashed line indicates the time at which the appraisal took place.
Figure 1

- Promptness
- Minutes On Task
- Quiz Scores
- Grade Sheets Posted
- Grade Book Up-To-Date
- Number of Discussion Comments

OCCURRENCES / OPPORTUNITY

WEEKS

GROUP I

GROUP II
Table I. Mean score percentages (proportion x 100) for the six low-occurrence dependent variables across all five subjects.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Mean in Baseline</th>
<th>Mean in Intervention: First 3 Weeks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade Sheets Posted</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promptness</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minutes on Task</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Discussion Comments</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90% Quiz Scores</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Book Up-to-Date</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table II. Mean score percentages (proportion x 100) for all ten dependent variables for each individual subject.
### TABLE II

#### Individual Subject Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Mean in Baseline</th>
<th>Mean in Intervention: First 3 Weeks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$S_1$</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$S_2$</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$S_3$</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$S_4$</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$S_5$</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER IV

Discussion

The present study demonstrated that a supervisor's qualitative statements in a performance appraisal were effective in bringing about a desired quantitative behavior change for both the administrative and academic tasks targeted. Those improvements occurred across a large variety of tasks, which differed in nature, the time necessary to complete them, and the amount of supervision typically involved.

Some fluctuations in the data were probably a result of other ongoing events in the system. During the seventh week of baseline, the program administrator required mid-semester summary data from the staff, which resulted in some dramatic increases in the percent of tasks completed for that week. For two tasks (grade sheets posted and grade-book up-to-date), a second increase occurred near the end of the intervention phase. This may have occurred due to the program administrator's requirements that these two tasks be completed on or before the last day of the semester.

In addition, the points for the completion of tasks during both baseline and intervention were assigned by the immediate supervisors inconsistently. This was noted by supervisors awarding all points for behaviors which the study revealed were actually below the criterion for points, suggesting that they were not actually monitoring supervisees' performance. However, it is unlikely that this point contingency affected the subjects' behavior any differently during
baseline than intervention.

The improvements which seemed to result from the appraisal maintained for about three to four weeks. This is notable, because the appraisal itself is merely a one-time event when supervisor and supervisee meet, rather than an ongoing procedure. These results suggest that repeated interventions on a monthly basis might be effective in maintaining desired performance of supervisees. Further research should attempt to substantiate this claim. If upheld, such a system would be expected to be less costly to managers in terms of time and effort than feedback procedures which require daily or weekly quantitative data to be collected and communicated.

Along these lines, it must be noted that the present study demonstrated a performance improvement when the qualitative statements accurately reflected the quantitative data. However, one cannot assume that the effects would be the same if the qualitative statements and the quantitative data were inconsistent, and further research should investigate this.

It must also be noted that the dependent variables in the present study were specified in such a way that they were easily measured, which allowed for greater accountability than in many of the appraisals used in organizations. For example, a typical appraisal might rate workers on "industriousness"; in this study, the dependent variable "industrious" was defined as "being engaged in work-related behaviors for the first 35 minutes of the office hour".

The performance appraisal probably achieved a desired behavior change, in part, as a function of the nature of supervisor-subordinate
relationships. That is, the supervisor's attention and approval were already important because of the relation of that attention to other events, such as promotion, recommendations, etc. Thus, the supervisor's comments during the appraisal may have cued the supervisee as to what the supervisor pays attention to, and the supervisees may have responded accordingly. In this way, the performance appraisal procedure makes use of the existing contingencies in an organization to bring about sizable improvements in the performance of front-line staff. It would be expected to have equivalent effects at all levels throughout an organization, but it remains the task of future research to substantiate this generality.
APPENDIX A

Informed Consent

We are currently working to develop better communication systems between the different levels of staff in the Introductory Psychology system. This semester we will be conducting a research project during your office hours and this form is a request for your agreement to participate.

We will not be changing any of the required tasks in this project nor will there be any new course requirements. Rather, we request your permission to allow us to make new use of typically collected data. These data are the ones already collected for your daily points, as specified in the TA manual (e.g., attendance, grade records keeping, etc.).

If you agree to participate, all data will be kept confidential and anonymous. Furthermore, you have the right to withdraw your consent at any time during the study; however, I would request that you submit your rationale in writing if you do so, although this is in no way required. If you do not agree to participate, you will in no way receive any adverse effects.

We hope you discover methods that will make the relationship between the different levels of our hierarchy more positive and functional. We appreciate your support, and will be glad to give you complete details of the results at the end of the study.

I have read the above statements, understand them, and agree to participate.

_________________________  ________________________
Signature                   Date

_________________________
Witness
APPENDIX B

Comments to the Supervisee

Thanks for taking time to do this. Believe me, I know how busy you are. What I would like to do today is to conduct a performance appraisal. Basically, what this is is a checklist of things that you have done for us so far this semester. Typically, we conduct these appraisals with upper-level staff (ODAs), but this is the first time with TAs. I keep this appraisal sheet, so please listen carefully.

As you have probably noticed, I've rated you on a scale of 1, 2, 3, or NA.

1 = excellent; these are very difficult to achieve.
2 = satisfactory; don't be offended by a satisfactory mark - you know how much we require of our staff; this is to say that it's still a cut above the norm.
3 = needs work; I don't want you to feel badly about getting a 3, and we don't think bad things about you either; these are just areas that we know you could improve on. You must realize that when we chose you as staff, that already placed you a cut above the other students - so it's all relative.
NA = This stands for not applicable - in other words, I have never seen you do this so I have nothing to go on, OK?

Are there any questions? Why don't we start.

Subject: __________________________

1) First of all, attendance/promptness - I gave you a 3, needs work.
It has come to my attention that although your attendance is good, you do seem to come in late once in awhile. It's really important for you to be here on time so we can work through the day's materials. Any questions?

2) As far as Industry is concerned, I gave you a 3 on this also. It seems that you plan your time well, but it would probably help if you tried to be on-task a bit more. I realize it's sometimes difficult with the other on-going activities, but let's see what we can do. Any questions?

3) As far as Participation in Groups goes, what you say is good but I would like to hear more discussion comments. For this reason, I gave you a 3. Make sure you take the time you feel necessary to sit down with your supervisors and really discuss the material. I think that you'll find that it will help your in-class confidence. Any questions?

4) For Accepting Feedback Well, I gave you a 1. You obviously realize that your feedback is important too, and it is -- keep it up. Any questions?

5) I have also been noticing that you've had some quiz score problems. This may be a result of not enough discussion comments, but here too I gave you a 3. It's real important that you know the material well. Let's see what we can do, OK? Any questions?

6) Concerning number six "Provides Students with Prompt Feedback", I have noticed that you are getting your lab reports back soon, but that you are having problems with getting your grade sheet posted. Posting an updated grade sheet may be the single-most important
source of feedback to your students. Because of the importance of this, I gave you a 3. Let's see what we can do about this, OK?

Any questions?

7) On the whole, you stay on top of Recurring Clerical Tasks well. Your gradebook is one of these tasks which is of great importance. I have noticed that this is not being kept up-to-date as well as it could be. This again is an important task, so again, I gave you a 3. Any questions?

Comment - If it seems that you are getting a lot of 3's, it may be the case that a few small adjustments in your daily routine could solve these problems.

8) On this one, I gave you an excellent 1. I have never heard you say anything negative about the system. I can't stress to you the importance of this enough. Systems function because of good PR. You do this well; keep it up. Any questions?

9) I again gave you an excellent 1. All feedback to your students has been well written. This is important because it is based on this feedback that your students must make their corrections. Clarity, too, is important and you do this well. Keep it up. Any questions?

10) As far as #10 is concerned, I gave you an excellent 1. You are always pleasant to interact with and are a good attribute to our system. It's good to have you on our staff.

So in summary -

Your strengths are definitely -

- Not criticizing the system;
- The feedback that you give to your students;
- Your pleasant interactions;
- Your feedback to us about the system.

Some things to work on are –

- Promptness to your office hours;
- Staying on-task more often;
- More discussion in groups;
- Improve on quiz scores;
- Posting your students' grade sheets;
- Keeping your grade book up-to-date.

Any comments?
### APPENDIX C

**Behavioral Supervision System**  
**Self-Development Checklist**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervisor: Steven S. Armstrong</th>
<th>Student:</th>
<th>Date: 11/7/80</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(On Supervisee)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Needs Work</th>
<th>NA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Attendance/Promptness - attends meetings and is no later than one minute past, 95% of the time. Examples:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Industry - is on-task 90% of the time during work hours - plans time well. Examples:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Participation in groups - raises discussion topics and/or answers questions relevant to assigned material. Examples:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Accepts feedback well from supervisor (does not laugh, defend, lose temper). Examples:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Daily preparation - shows mastery of materials through 90% weekly cumulative quiz scores. Examples:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Provides students with prompt feedback (hall sheets posted, self-management and lab reports promptly returned). Examples: ____________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>NA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

7. Stays on top of recording clerical tasks (grade book, rat chain). Examples: __________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>NA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

8. Does not criticize the organization when talking about the system. Examples: __________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>NA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

9. Good writing skills (grammar, spelling, neatness). Examples: ____________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>NA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

10. Interacts pleasantly on an informal basis outside meetings. Examples: ____________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>NA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Strengths:**  

**Weaknesses:**  

**Summary:**  

---

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