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# The Human Dimension in Performance Appraisal

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## The Management Mentality

Management is "in" these days. At the end of 1982, the top item in college bookstores was Garfield; in mid-November 1983, the top items were Kenneth Blanchard, *The One Minute Manager*, and Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies*.<sup>1</sup> The change from the self-help volumes of a decade ago to the emphasis on management is a comment on cultural change and attitudes. More recently, getting the job done well appears to be of greater interest than the antics of a comic cat. Underlying this "management mania," as some might call it, is a tension in which libraries have been caught for generations, the conflict of attempting to evaluate objectively what is essentially a subjective experience. Service versus productivity is the polarity for libraries.

One element in the tension reflected by last fall's best sellers on management is not their emphasis on technologically based efficiency but their surprising acknowledgement of the human element in large, successful businesses. In many instances, Peters and Waterman describe the human relationships within the companies they studied—from hype to personal pride in products. But at the basis of the high performance of the companies in their study was a strong sense of the human dimension, the personal touch, the almost forgotten second-mile ethos of the work ethic. Their identification of "close to the customer," "productivity through people," "hands-on, value driven" as three of the eight attributes of excellence are people-based.<sup>2</sup>

Libraries have always experienced the tension which these management writers are now recognizing. Libraries provide service, yet much of the work of library personnel is production-oriented. For the past twenty years, libraries have been developing management systems focused on production. As librarians have grown into and

become parts of expanding bureaucracies, management's requirement of accountability has been the motivation for performance evaluation. However, we now find ourselves in 1984 needing to look more carefully at the human dimension in management.

## Recent Research Reports

Not only has "management mania" taken hold in libraries in the past decade; the status of the employee in public agencies has also created the need for carefully defined documentation about the performance of personnel. Stanley P. Hodge has provided a fine treatment of the performance appraisal instrument that has been shaped by legislative and judicial decisions in the past decade of evolving equal employment opportunity requirements.<sup>3</sup> Hodge identifies seven functions for which performance appraisals are often used: facilitating personnel planning, making employment decisions, supporting job development, providing performance feedback to employees, eliciting feedback from employees, creating a base for modification of behavior, and establishing needs for training or coaching.<sup>4</sup> He traces the legal base for each of these characteristics and provides a sample of a document used at Texas A & M that could have general application throughout libraries.

Hodge appears to understand the advice of H. Rebecca Kroll, who sets out four criteria for any evaluation program.

1. Determine what the job is. (Define the goals.)
2. Establish a reasonable performance level. (Define the objectives in terms of quantity, quality, time spent.)
3. Measure the actual performance (by first-hand observation, viewing completed work, reading the employee's own report, and the like).
4. Compare the actual performance to the standards set.<sup>5</sup>

Both Kroll and Hodge follow the wisdom of Robert D. Steuart and John Taylor Eastlick, who have articulated five functions for a personnel

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evaluation program. These include measuring performance against job description expectations, documenting to justify termination, providing a base for positive personnel action, indicating an individual's capability and potential, and generating personal goals which support implementation of institutional goals.<sup>6</sup>

The bibliographies of these four writers direct the administrator to a selection of library, personnel, and federal sources written during the period between 1968 and 1982 but centering on the years 1977 to 1981. These sources, supplemented by N. K. Kaske's reviews of performance and appraisal that appear in the American Library Association *Yearbook*, 1976-81,<sup>7</sup> provide significant reading and a sampling of evaluation/appraisal instruments.

### Why Performance Evaluation May Not Work

Despite library management's ambivalence about performance evaluation, the phenomenon is not new, and it is here to stay. Regardless too of the mixed systems of management style, ranging from laissez faire to the latest adaptation of business school theorists, accountability in multiple copy is a fact of life to be faced, lived with, and worked through. Given these realities, the success or failure of any evaluation/appraisal experience depends upon the philosophy of the institution in which the evaluation is performed and the attitude of the person being evaluated toward the whole experience. The favorable attitude of the person being evaluated toward the event, the process, and the product of evaluation is essential to the effective implementation of any evaluative experience. If the individual fails to perceive value in the product, the process and the event are irrelevant. Saul Gellerman said this more compellingly when he commented that personnel would "want to correct the deficiencies in their performance if they *agreed* that they were deficient and if there appeared to be enough *advantage* in correcting them to justify the effort."<sup>8</sup>

At least four common causes of personnel dissatisfaction with evaluations focus on perceptions of the lack of effectiveness of the evaluation. These causes may or may not exist in fact, but if they are perceived to exist, trouble ensues:

1. if across-the-board raises always appear to occur;
2. if nonperformers appear to be promoted;
3. if supervisors always rate high (or low);
4. if fear of legal action mitigates evaluation.

Each of these is so common that they usually fail to be discussed in other than staff-room asides.

Steuart and Eastlick cite six pitfalls of performance evaluation which they credit to the Denver Public Library's *Manual for Performance Evaluation*. These are the errors of (1) the "halo effect"; (2) "prejudice and partiality"; (3) "leniency, softness, or spinelessness"; (4) "central tendency"; (5) "contrast"; and (6) "association."<sup>9</sup> Errors one and three are opposites and reflect attitudes of the evaluator. Error two refers to discrimination in any of its legally defined forms. Errors four and six refer to the middle of the range and sequential constancy in rating. Error five refers to the actual performance versus the rater's perception of potential. These "errors" are articulated for supervisors to remind them of their responsibility in the rating process.

### Pre-Employment Analysis

Good experiences with personnel evaluation begin before employment and are particularly important at the employment stage. The foundation for good personnel evaluation experiences lies in a clear articulation of the tasks to be performed, the skills required to perform the tasks, and matching persons with skills appropriate to the tasks. This kind of pre-employment analysis can facilitate the development of job descriptions and performance expectations.

For instance, who has not experienced the page who has no numerical acuity? Such frustration might be avoided by two pre-employment decisions. One decision is to determine that the primary tasks of pages require the skill of accurately placing books on shelves, reading shelves, and even performing inventory. The primary skill is the ability to perceive numerical sequences quickly. To achieve the match between task, skill, and personnel may require a simple numerical acuity examination, with minimum scores for employment and for increased levels of experience and responsibility.

In another instance, the pre-employment decision may be that the human needs of the library require a warm, "motherly" figure at the circulation counter. Certainly this primary public relations location in the library requires personnel that have more than minimal interpersonal skills. This question particularly needs to be considered as we increase the use of computer-based circulation systems that require combining a different set of technological skills with human response skills. A decision may have to be made that the human response skills are more critical at the circulation counter!

Consider the reference department, where skill is required in "negotiating the reference

interview," the current jargon for being able to ask the kinds of questions which help the user define a need and provide the librarian with data to begin to help meet that need. Reference librarians in the past have been trained in bibliographical knowledge but have received little training in inquiry and search strategy. The Association for Clinical Pastoral Education<sup>10</sup> is a pioneer in the use of *verbatim reports* as a means of developing listening/hearing skills. Their method could be adapted for use in library education after a careful description of the tasks, skills, and expected performance of reference librarians. Verbatim reports could also be applied in the library as a technique for evaluating reference skills. This would require preparation of reports of the reference interview from which a judgment could be made of the effectiveness of the reference librarian's interpretation of the question and initial search strategy.

Consider the performance evaluation from the perspective of a letter of reference. Letters of reference need to be specific, describe the candidate's skills with concrete examples, refer to career goals, and note limitation where appropriate.<sup>11</sup> Well-documented letters of reference are based on precise evaluation. This is especially important for students who may use library employment as references for their first professional jobs.

As stated at the beginning of this section, successful performance evaluation is based on decisions made by administrators before the employment of the person to be evaluated. Without careful, recurring analysis of tasks and skills refined to reflect the variety and changing functions of library service, effective performance evaluation will not occur. Many things can impede effective evaluation, but none can substitute for this level of preparation.

### So What?

In 1984, with all of its inherent overtones and innuendoes, with the "management mania" which appears to have cultural endorsement, with the realistic need for accountability, and with the

increased impact of technology on our lives, performance evaluation/appraisal is not going to fade into the sunset. This phenomenon of life in the bureaucracy is with us. If current speculations are accurate, that 67 to 75 per cent of the American work force will be information-related by the end of the century, and if the predicted rates of change in other employment sectors take place, careful pre-employment analysis is going to be necessary. Pre-employment analysis of functions, because of these changes, is going to require modification of tasks and skills required and the evaluation of performance. At the base, however, of any performance evaluation/appraisal system is the attitude of the person being evaluated. If the individual places value on the product of evaluation, the individual will be willing to change behavior. If, however, the individual does not value the product, then the process will not provide positive individual benefit. Even "one minute managers" waste time and energy with persons who do not value the product.

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6. Robert D. Steuart and John Taylor Eastlick, *Library Management*, 2d ed. (Littleton, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1981), 97.
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10. Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, New York 10027.
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