
The Employee Perspective in the Evaluation Process

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Evaluations. No one is ecstatic about making or receiving them; however, they are necessary. When the time approaches for my work to be unpleasant confrontation, the worse the problem is likely to become, and it is the employees who until this year, when I became a member of my library's performance appraisal committee, did I know that supervisors dread the process too. I learned the pressures of deciding on the "perfect" terminology: one simple word can make the difference between the employee's feeling that the evaluation was fair or that the supervisor was being too critical. Favoritism is another pitfall to be avoided. If one employee has a better than average work relationship with a supervisor, peers may think the subordinate is collecting "brownie points." The employee as well as the supervisor must approach the performance appraisal with objectivity.

The evaluation should perform two functions: praise work that was done well; and identify work that could have been done better. The good supervisor does both throughout the year and keeps a written record of both positive and negative occurrences for all staff supervised. This makes the supervisor's job easier, because it provides *specific* incidents to mention to the employee during the evaluation. Vague, general complaints are more likely to be fruitlessly irritating to employees than to help them improve their performance. We have to know exactly what the problem is if you want us to improve, and we would rather be told about the problem when it arises so that we can correct it immediately rather than be confronted with it at evaluation time.

Of course, positive feedback is also welcomed. It is what motivates people. However, sometimes it seems that supervisors have so much correcting to do that recognition of good work is overlooked. Supervisors might try to remedy this problem by making it a rule during the year to give at least as much positive feedback

as negative feedback within their departments. There are problems in any work situation, but there should also be something being done well by somebody in any department. I am not asking that supervisors patronize employees—most of us are smart enough to recognize that—however, I do believe that accentuating the positive whenever possible can pay off in the long run.

However, there is a caveat to accentuating the positive in an evaluation. It seems that for some supervisors, this is an easy way to avoid being honest with an employee. Almost everyone prefers harmony to conflict, but the longer poor work habits are overlooked to avoid a potentially unpleasant confrontation, the worse the problem is likely to become, and it is the employees who work most closely with a poor performer who tend to bear the burden of trying to pick up the slack. So by failing to nip the problem in the bud, a supervisor may be causing a proliferation of problems among other staff. Of course, failing to point out unsatisfactory work habits when they arise is most immediately unfair to the poor performer. When asked what they want and need most from their supervisors, staff always include feedback about their work. Most staff genuinely want to improve. It is unfair not to point out their inadequacies so that they can begin to improve them, not only to help the library, but also to help them reach their full potential as workers and people.

Management consultant A. O. Ohman has been quoted as saying that "workers have a fine sensitivity to spiritual qualities and want to work for a boss who believes in something and in whom they can believe."¹ One way employees find out what their boss believes in within the work environment is through goal setting. This is really the first step in the evaluation process. It is management's responsibility to define jobs and help their employees set realistic objectives. This is a cooperative task that the supervisor and subordinate do together. The supervisor knows the limits—what tasks the employees must perform to meet the job's minimum requirements, what tasks fall under another employee's job responsibilities,

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what tasks are beyond the employee's capabilities. Within those limits there is often flexibility in a person's job, and this is where the most creative part of goal setting comes in. Employees and supervisors can work together to come up with special projects that they would like to see accomplished during the year. When the supervisor and subordinate cooperate in planning the work for the year, the employee will have a clear understanding of what is expected of him and what about his work is to be evaluated.

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Ideally, the supervisor meets with the subordinate periodically to make sure that everything is on track and to revise, add, or delete goals as conditions change. If goals are monitored during the year, the formal evaluation interview is just a part of an ongoing process that both the supervisor and employee can be comfortable with. The formal evaluation interview becomes a time for mutual analysis and evaluation of the past year. This is also the time to begin planning for the coming year. This will all help diminish the dread that both parties may have felt in past anticipation of performance appraisals. The employee will feel most comfortable if the supervisor approaches the evaluation with objective information and an open mind.

Peer Evaluations

Support staff are more likely to be in touch with each other than with supervisors. Often employees are not as willing to complain to their superiors when certain members are not performing as expected. The feeling of being the office tattletale can make employees uncomfortable in talking with their supervisors about the inadequate performer. Peer evaluations can help ease the tension that results when staff feel that supervisors are not in touch with their employees.

Supervisors need to know how employees relate to each other. If staff members have difficulty in responding to each other, they may also have the same problems in assisting patrons. The manner in which coworkers view one another is often the way patrons see the same workers. Through peer evaluations, the supervisor can get an idea of how fellow staffers relate to each other. Peer evaluations which consist of simply-asked questions and the assurance that the evaluator's

name will be withheld can produce candid evaluations which will add new dimensions to the performance appraisal process. Managers who read peer reviews become better acquainted with employees' overall feelings about and assessments of their coworkers.

Now, let us turn the tables and examine the benefits of supervisors being evaluated by employees. This process is a way of letting managers know the positive and negative aspects of their supervisory skills. Though some subordinates' expectations of the supervisor are that they are superpeople who do all things right at all times, most employees realize that supervisors are human too. A study supported by the Organizational Effectiveness Unit of the Army Research Institute for the behavioral and Social Sciences found that with regard to supervisor and subordinate views of supervisors, superiors often overestimated the extent to which they had a thorough knowledge of the subordinate's job. Surprisingly, superiors underestimated the degree to which their employees trusted them.² We, as employees, should be willing to train new supervisors so they will have a clearer knowledge of what each employee's job entails. If the evaluation of supervisors becomes a part of the performance appraisal process, subordinates should evaluate their superiors with the same degree of professionalism that subordinates expect in the appraisals of their own work. Both should be done with complete honesty and without past prejudices.

Motivation

Motivating the employee is another ongoing challenge. The work environment is an often overlooked factor in employee motivation. Poor working conditions surrounding the employee are likely to make him less productive than good working conditions. This may consequently result in a low rating of the employee's work performance at evaluation time. If unsatisfactory conditions exist in the work area, the supervisor *can* take certain precautions to help motivate employees.

Awards and other forms of recognition also help motivate employees. In 1983, the Cumberland County Public Library started giving Employee Extraordinaire awards to employees who do special projects to promote and maintain the needs of the public. This type of recognition makes fellow employees appreciate the tasks performed by these special employees. This type of employee is not rare, but they may suppress their talents because they feel that no one cares.

Supervisors need to let those "exceptional" staff members know that they will work for them and do all they can to make the employee's working life pleasant—that they will go as far as possible to keep the exceptional person with the library. These are the employees whose evaluations will indicate a need for merit raises or promotions, even in these times of minimal salary increases.

If the performance appraisal process is an honest, open one, employees will know that each evaluation does not necessarily mean the end of a career. Results of staff evaluations can be beneficial to both management and employees. How individual library systems benefit from public support depends on the type of service they provide to the community. Positive attitudes and a willingness to do everything possible to satisfy the patron can only be provided by staff members who are happy with their work. Yearly employee evaluations can help provide support for those who are doing a good job and perhaps some incentive for those who are not.

References

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2. Ilgen, Daniel R., "Supervisor & Subordinate Relations to Performance Appraisal Sessions," *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 20 (December 1981):311-330.



Lillian Gerhardt, editor-in-chief of *School Library Journal* and speaker at the NCLA Biennial Conference. The editor regrets that Ms. Gerhardt was incorrectly identified in the Winter 1983 issue of *North Carolina Libraries*. (Photo by Frank Sparger.)