

STOP WASTING YOUR TIME: Create Performance Appraisals that Make Sense!

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“Everyone who enjoys doing performance appraisals, please stand up.” It never fails. Whenever I start the workshop on performance appraisals at the Michigan Public Service Institute (MPSI) with that question, nobody stands! Universally, it seems, we dread conducting evaluations of our team members. Why?

Supervisors cite several reasons for dreading doing performance appraisals:

- They dread having the “uncomfortable” conversation with that problem employee. (Most of us seek to avoid conflict with other people).
- Supervisors believe that the performance appraisal discussion and process don’t bring about any real changes in performance or behavior.
- They are a waste of time. And they interrupt my “real” work.
- The questions in the evaluation instrument don’t fit our work, making it hard to make them relevant.

The list goes on. In my four-plus decades of watching you from the cheap seats, it has become obvious that most of these reasons are absolutely true. Ms./Mr. Supervisor, you are busier than your predecessors. You have more demands on you than your predecessors. You are way more accessible to the public and others than your predecessors. And yet you are asked to meet the demands of the Human Resources Department by completing a generic one-size-fits-all evaluation instrument that is lengthy, redundant, and not relevant for you or the members of your team. In other words, a waste of time.

Yet, I will also hear the same Leaders complain that there needs to be greater accountability and that some team members aren’t living up to fair and reasonable expectations.

So, how do busy supervisors create accountability with a performance appraisal process that is relevant, efficient, and fair? To respond to that question, we must start with the basics.

The Basics of Performance Appraisal

It is a great business for consultants and overgrown bureaucracies to make performance appraisals complex, time-consuming, and often irrelevant. Long, redundant, and convoluted performance appraisal instruments and processes lose sight of three basic realities of appraising performance:

1. **Rater and Ratee.** All performance appraisals are ultimately about the expectations of a Rater and a Ratee. Successful performance assessment and accountability cannot occur without clear, upfront expectations between a rater and a ratee.
2. **Accountability** on the job falls into three categories of increasing difficulty. (Dick Grote, Discipline Without Punishment, 2006)
 - **Attendance.** Are you there, on time, and ready to go? Attendance is the easiest category of accountability. It requires clear expectations and positive and negative feedback.

- **Job Performance.** This is more difficult because jobs, technology, and demands change over time. Yet, clear expectations and positive and negative feedback are essential for holding an employee accountable.
- **Behavior.** This is the big kahuna! How people act. What they do and don't do. When supervisors think of their problematic employees, it is mostly about poor/bad behavior. Again, accountability can only occur with clear expectations and positive and negative feedback.
- 3. **Usable.** Lengthy, convoluted, irrelevant performance appraisal instruments and processes are unrealistic, even dysfunctional, for most public works supervisors. The whole process must be efficient, time-sensible, and owned by the rater and ratee.

Stop Wasting Your Time: Create a Sensible Performance Appraisal Process.

So, DPW Director start with you and your leadership team. Have the following discussion (facilitated or not):

- What should the Director expect of the members of their team?
- What should the members of the team expect of the Director?

When you have the discussion, start by using two flip charts and having the team (or break into two or more if it is a large team) answer on one flip chart, and you answer on another. Now, discuss, compare, and combine the answers to each question into one set of expectations for the Director and one for the members.

What do you have at that moment? A list of expectations for yourself and a list for your direct reports. It may be a list that hits job performance behavior or both. You now have the base for a relevant, shared ownership, even dynamic performance appraisal process. What can you do with this base of expectations?

- Make the list as open categories for annual or semi-annual performance appraisal discussions.
- Create a five-point scale for assessing how the person is doing. You are probably familiar with the most common five-point scale: A, B, C, D, and F. If you want to make it a 13-point scale, simply add plus (+) and minus (-) to the scores.
- In addition to the list of expectations, you could add a separate category, "Goals for the coming year." At the senior level, this can also be useful in identifying changes and improvements that you want a senior leader to achieve. Adding goals below this level is often not useful or relevant.

Experiment with this approach with the senior leadership team and repeat the process with other department members. Thus, the streets supervisor meets with their team. The same is true for water distribution, wastewater, forestry, etc.

One of the nice aspects of this approach, beyond its simplicity and relevance to the particular individual and team, is that you created the instrument and can change it. As expectations change, the rater and ratee can discuss changing the instrument to be more relevant.

Making the Performance Appraisal that You Are Stuck with Useful.

Many of you are “stuck” with performance appraisals that the H.R. Department or the top boss has forced upon you. Frequently, these one-size-fits-all instruments are a source of frustration and undermine accountability. Raters and ratees don’t treat them seriously because they don’t see how they are useful or relate to their work. “Here, just sign this,” says the supervisor, “I have to turn it in to H.R. by tomorrow.” Another square filled- let’s move on with work.

One moderately successful approach for dealing with this situation is to try to make the one-size-fits-all performance appraisal relevant to you. Again, starting with the DPW Leadership Team, take the categories/questions and ask a couple of questions about the ratees:

- How should I interpret this question as it relates to us?
- What bullet points should I use to guide me on this question?
- Which of these questions are most relevant and least relevant to our expectations?

After that discussion with your team, add the relevant expectation bullet points to the organization-wide performance appraisal instrument. Doing this will make the instrument more useful to you and your team. By the way, it is very difficult for H>R. or others to disagree with you, making the instrument and process more relevant to your team.

Closing Thoughts

Performance appraisal does not have to be a painful or dreadful activity. It starts with clarity of expectations between a rater and a ratee. That conversation with a team or individual can be very healthy and positive. The follow-up discussions in a performance appraisal-feedback meeting can also be positive and healthy.

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