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Evaluation Instruments—More than the Forms...

By **Julie Todaro, Ph.D.**

Of all the human resources issues and management responsibilities “out there,” evaluating employees is the most hated. Managers hate to evaluate; employees hate to be evaluated. It doesn't seem to matter whether employees feel they are doing well or not, and it doesn't seem to matter if managers are going to give an employee a good evaluation or a bad one—everyone hates to evaluate. Evaluations should be taken as an opportunity to sum up and provide specific direction on performance elements and discussions that have been occurring all year long. In addition, the evaluation session should be seen as a time to motivate, reward, direct/guide, identify changes needed, identify any training needed and correct any unacceptable behavior. In addition, newer processes and forms now include reviews and assessments of goals and objectives; measurement and discussion of outcomes as well as discussions and agreements on future directions; next year's goals, objectives and outcomes; and any training, retraining or redirection needed.

So why do people hate evaluation so much? Some answers are more obvious than others. The obvious reasons include:

- Direct confrontation of any kind is always difficult.
- Chronicling 12 months (or more) of performance—either good or bad—is time consuming and hard work.
- In many of our organizations, it is not possible to reward excellent, outstanding or even good behavior, therefore many managers feel that positive evaluations are difficult because they are not “enough.”
- Many managers are not trained in the evaluation process in general, including motivation, but specifically in giving criticism and articulating changes needed.
- Many employees are not comfortable in receiving criticism.
- Correcting behavior is very challenging.

Less obvious reasons include:

- Many organizations don't have well articulated processes for evaluating employees
- Many organizations do not have well designed evaluation forms.
- Many employees aren't trained in the evaluation process.

Many organizations do not have ancillary documents—specifically those related to the evaluation process—in place, such as up-to-date job descriptions, employee or job/position outcomes, departmental goals and objectives, employee goals and objectives, management expectations, standards of service, etc.

What elements make for an exemplary evaluation process for organizations?

Training

Everyone needs to be trained on the evaluation process and this training should begin on day one of an employee's work in the organization.

First week—Employees should be given their most recent (and up-to-date) job description and a copy of the evaluation form that will be used to evaluate their performance. In addition, they should be given the timelines for employees and managers as well as information on how employees might work toward acceptable and exemplary performance during any probation periods and beyond and how they should maintain performance standards and content for their evaluation.

First month—The employee should be reminded of any probation timelines. (See the “Probation Evaluation” section

below for additional information.)

Probation Evaluation Date—Most probation evaluations are at 30, 60 or 90 days and in some organizations within the first six months of hire. Probation evaluation forms are typically duplicates of the general evaluation forms. Managers should prepare for the probation evaluation with even more care than typical evaluations and should follow all processes leading up to this evaluation with great care. Recommended processes for this time period include checklists for employees and managers to complete, consistent communication and frequent ‘how work is progressing’ meetings. During this time period, corrections to and compliments of work activities should be swift to allow employees time to correct inappropriate behavior and continue good work.

General training on all performance evaluation processes should be available for employees throughout their tenure within the organization. Ideally, individualized training should be available online.

Policies

An organization’s performance evaluation policies are the most critical part of the evaluation process and of those processes related to the evaluation process, such as any non-performance issues like discipline, grievances and probation. In addition, policies that relate to employees and their performance are not always labeled “employee” or “performance” policies. Both managers and employees should learn about the breadth of organizational policies that relate to performance and those timelines and ancillary forms that relate to those policies. Managers should take great care that umbrella organization policies specifically relate to their employees as needed and that all newer performance elements such as hardware/software/technology are covered by some policies. If they are not, managers should request updated or newly designed policies to cover their needs. In addition, managers should establish a system for tracking employee and performance-related legislation at the local, state and federal level to ensure that all existing organizational policies are up-to-date. In addition, managers should assume the responsibility for updating employees when an organization’s policies change.

Procedures

There are some obvious statements for procedures. All policies must have procedures and all procedures must—in some way—match a policy. Procedures for personnel/performance policies are no exception. Just as managers must track and educate about policies for up-to-date information, procedures must be tracked, consistently reviewed for their currency and built into timelines. Employees must be educated and trained to use procedures as they relate to their performance. As legislation may change a policy, it might also affect the procedures used to carry out policies.

Timelines

All timelines—and there are many—in policies and procedures, need to be identified and duplicated in a master calendar for employees and managers to track and follow. Some organizations also create a timeline guide just for employee performance to ensure that all processes are followed to ensure equity. Timelines are among the more critical elements of personnel processes and ensure not only equity, but also due process for employees and managers alike. Individuals involved in employee performance processes should make sure that their timelines are followed and that they document when others don’t follow timelines. In addition, when one individual does not follow a timeline others in the process should continue to follow their own timelines and document their concern for lack of process in others.

Organizational design

All too often managers select or are given forms for evaluating staff that do not meet the design of their organization, or, the forms match one level of employees but not another level or they match one department or function within an organization but not another. How can you tell if they don’t match?

- The employee has more than one manager or has someone who manages them and another who coordinates some of their activities and the process and form doesn’t allow for others to weigh in on performance. Is it as easy as just having two people each fill out a form on the same person? Or having one fill out the form and the other attach content or does it work to have the primary manager talk to others involved and then include that content in their remarks? While these are interim solutions, the reality is that these processes do not provide the exact process that is needed to ensure the cleanest and most equitable process for the employee.
- The forms ask general questions that meet the basic performance assessment needs of all employees such as punctuality but the forms don’t include questions that allow managers to comment on, for example, public service interactions like basic or in-depth reference that are essential to job performance.
- The forms allow managers to assess the performance of an individual and specific work they do in their primary job functions but the organizational design is one of teams and the forms don’t allow for comments on how the employee works in a team.

Forms

There are a multitude of forms issues, in addition to those related to organizational design issues above, and managers should never forget that forms should be used to document good behavior, bad behavior and give specifics for improving employee performance. Although many only view the evaluation form and meeting as punitive the true process creates the process that motivates, instructs, supports and guides employees to optimal performance.

Managers should assess their forms by answering the following questions:

- Are there individual forms to match each aspect of the performance process?
- If there is no need for specific forms, does the form used for multiple purposes meet the needs of all those purposes such as upgrades? Promotions? Bonuses? Discipline? Probation? Evaluation? Grievance? Termination?
- Do forms match level, type and functions of employees appropriately?
- Are form(s) current and does all terminology meet current job needs?
- Do form(s) match policies and procedures?
- Do forms provide managers and employees space for customization when necessary? Do they allow for comments? Response to others comments?

What elements make a great evaluation form?

The best forms reflect the process as outlined above, however, there are a number of elements of the form itself that can be recommended.

- Words, phrases and terminology used in job descriptions should match those used in the evaluation form.
- Words, phrases and terminology used in forms should match those used in documentation that is gathered throughout the year to support both good and bad employee performance.
- Evaluation forms should be organized into performance categories that have a relationship to job descriptions. For example, if there is a *public service* or *customer service* list of job description responsibilities, the evaluation form should have a section identified as *public* or *customer service*.
- Forms should offer levels of performance. Although many forms offer numerical ratings such as a scale of 1-5 or 1-7, the best forms go beyond only numerical levels to offer by providing—at the very least—specificity about each number and—at the very best—sentences or phrases that offer performance comments for each possible choice. For example:

Performance Area

Performance Measurement

EXAMPLE 1

	Minimal opportunity to offer employee feedback
Employee provides appropriate customer service.	Worst to Best; 7 is “not applicable” 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

EXAMPLE 2

	More opportunity to offer employee feedback
Employee provides appropriate customer service.	Select one. 1 = unacceptable 2 = minimally adequate 3 = adequate 4 = good 5 = outstanding 6 = excellent

7 = not applicable

EXAMPLE 3

Employee provides appropriate customer service.

Good opportunity to offer employee feedback

Check all that apply in the appropriate level.

1 ___ Employee committed a serious infraction against the organization's customer service policies and procedures.

___ Employee consistently exhibits inappropriate customer service behavior.

___ Employee does not follow the organization's customer service policies and procedures.

2 ___ Employee does not always follow the organization's customer service policies and procedures.

3 ___ Employee follows the organization's customer service policies and procedures.

4 ___ Employee follows the organization's customer service policies and procedures and received positive citations for customer interactions.

5 ___ Employee follows the organization's customer service policies and procedures, received positive citations for customer interactions and has exhibited and distinguished themselves within the organization for provided outstanding customer service.

6 ___ Employee follows the organization's customer service policies and procedures, has received positive citations, has distinguished themselves for excellent service and has been identified as a mentor/leader in customer service training and education.

7 ___ Not applicable

- Forms should provide open-ended comment areas in at least one place in the evaluation form and ideally following each performance area section in the form.
- Forms and the process for completing forms should emphasize the need for managers to provide documentation* to support levels of performance chosen and comments.

In closing...

The most dreaded process can be made into a tolerable process by making sure that a year-round approach to managing performance is adopted for optimal performance assessment. But how does one begin to figure out whether or not your organization has a good process? While my first recommendation would be to assess all performance elements, my most realistic advice would be to begin by assessing your organization's forms. I have had a number of individuals tell me there aren't *any* evaluation processes in their organization, which is distressing since my contention is that evaluation processes are one of the most important areas of today's 21 st century organization.

*Although this article wasn't designed to cover the entire employee performance process (training for job performance, communication, etc.) a key element of forms as well as all elements of the process is documentation. A future article will focus in on documentation in organizations and the critical difference it makes for both managers and employees.

Editorial

Health Insurance Problems and Solutions in Libraries

By **Jon Goodell**

Editor's Note: After reading this editorial, please consider responding to the questions at the end.

Library Journal recently reported that entry level salaries for librarians entering the job market in 2004 rose by 2.91% past 2003 levels. Although this increase does not keep up with inflation, hovering around 3.5%, it is much better than the previous year (October 15, 2005 online edition). Unfortunately, from the view of many library employees this upward trend is outweighed by the dramatic rise in health care expenses.

Healthcare costs are at an apparent all time high. Although there are many factors contributing to this, the reality is that the rising cost of health services disproportionately out pace salary increases. This is a significant problem for both libraries as fiscal institutions as well as for their employees. For some libraries, health insurance premiums are increasing at a rate of 10-30% annually.

Some libraries respond to rising health care premiums by evenly sharing the expense with employees. However, with raises limited to 2-4% and insurance premium increases of 10-30% per year the financial burden becomes untenable for many employees. They must choose between paying the higher rates, adopting a private insurance plan, or dropping coverage altogether. Libraries must offer benefit incentives beyond standard health and dental plans in order to remain competitive employers.

High health insurance costs may force less career-established librarians out of the profession and into more financially lucrative fields like database design and knowledge management. This would cause a technology brain drain in libraries. Those with transferable skills may choose to leave.

This also hurts the library's ability to retain coverage for remaining employees because when employees can no longer afford to use library sponsored health insurance the employer may lose some negotiating power when dealing with its insurer. Libraries must therefore walk a thin line by either covering an appropriate percentage of health insurance relative to the employee's income or offer new incentives to keep the library an attractive employer.

There are two main health insurance products: traditional health insurance that includes a higher monthly premium with lower out of pocket costs for actual medical care and the newer health savings account that has a low monthly premium but a high deductible that includes a tax sheltered savings account. Another option might be that libraries, which are used to collaborating, create a national library health insurance consortium that would negotiate a group health insurance rate.

The problem is somewhat similar to journal and database access prices. In a good year, budgets will grow by three or four percent. And yet journal and database access may increase by ten or fifteen percent annually. It is difficult for libraries to simply go without research journal access. Going without journal access in a library is not unlike going without health insurance for the employee. Each is critical to the mission and daily operation of libraries.

I hope others with more expertise than this librarian will share ways of overcoming this very important issue.

Do you have ideas? Does your library offer innovative plans to address rising health care costs?

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We would love to have your **feedback on these articles!**

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