

# Personnel evaluations — Are we being effective?

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**D**oes this scenario sound familiar to you? It's time for Firefighter Smith's annual employee evaluation. As Smith's supervisor, you know that he has trouble walking and chewing gum at the same time.

You haven't said anything to Smith about this, however, because you want to keep harmony in your life and also because you don't want Smith to start the "excuse festival" that's sure to come when you convey your observations.

Because you've been practicing the art of avoidance since the last evaluation, you see no reason to rock the boat this time, either. Smith continues to be a marginal employee with a file that shows him to be extremely average.

Worse than that scenario is Firefighter Jones, who possesses that same walking-and-chewing-gum thing that afflicts Smith, but only finds out once a year how badly she has been messing up, because that's the only time she receives any feedback from her supervisor. Jones wants to improve her performance, but has no one to guide and inspire her.

In any organization, personnel are the most valuable resource, and even more so in the fire service. It's understandable that we want to avoid conflict in our personal and professional lives, especially in close-knit work environments such as fire stations. But when we practice avoidance in dealing with our subordinates' behaviors, we're not only providing a disservice to that employee, we're doing an injustice to ourselves, our department and the community.

## Why evaluate?

The governmental bodies we work for engage people, material and money to

Performance appraisals can be as awkward to give as to receive, yet they're invaluable to the employee and to the department.

provide various services to the public. The most important resource is the people, because an organization would have a hard time providing services with just cash and a lot of equipment. The human factor is critical in our ability to provide services to our customers.

The management of these human resources is one of the most important functions in any fire department. According to Dr. Harry Carter, in "Management in the Fire Service," the formal performance evaluation portion of human resource management serves three basic functions in a fire department.

1) To **inform subordinates how**

**they're doing** and that their supervisors are aware of that performance.

2) To **give supervisors a more objective method to look at performance**, and not rely on the more subjective personal preferences.

3) To **identify and allow the correction of deficient behaviors**.

These appraisals might be based on specific goals a manager wants to reach, or they can be developed using certain behaviors that an employer would like an employee to exhibit. Communicating what is to be evaluated, as well as assuring consistency in the process, eliminates some of the subjectivity.

In "Winning the Fire Service Leadership Game," Hugh Caulfield alludes to this as a potential problem when he talks about productivity being a measure of the effectiveness and efficiency of a fire company's performance. Productivity may be determined by how well an engine company performs at

fires, how well it maintains the equipment and fire station, the appearance of the firefighters or other issues. In the formal employee evaluation process, having some type of guideline to follow will assist in ensuring that all the supervisors and employees understand what's expected.

## Accentuate the positive

Another concern of the evaluation process for both the supervisor and the subordinate is the negative connotation that employee appraisals seem to have. For these evaluations to become viable and beneficial, the process must be ongoing, include both the positive and negative aspects of the employee's performance, and be done in an atmosphere that encourages open dialogue.

The ongoing part of this process doesn't need to be as standardized as a for-

## Some nuts and bolts

The various employee-evaluation forms our department uses were developed by consensus, with input from the whole department, and include behaviors and benchmarks that assist in providing direction. They also tend to be a bit more user-friendly than generalized forms.

Up to several dozen evaluation points (depending on the position) are included under nine overall standards:

- |                                   |                     |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| 1) Leadership/supervisory ability | 6) Attitude         |
| 2) Communications ability         | 7) Initiative       |
| 3) Decision-making ability        | 8) Public relations |
| 4) Technical knowledge/ability    | 9) Personal fitness |
| 5) Interpersonal relations        |                     |

Each of the evaluation points is scored as Superior, Above Average, Satisfactory, Needs Improvement or Unsatisfactory.

**Superior:** Indicates exceptional performance that consistently exceeds the requirements of the position.

**Above Average:** Performance that consistently meets and occasionally exceeds the requirements of the position.

**Satisfactory:** Indicates performance that consistently meets the requirements of the position.

**Needs Improvement:** Performance that is inconsistent in meeting the requirements of the position.

**Unsatisfactory:** Performance that does not meet the requirements of the position.

The evaluation form's last page features a section called the development plan, part of which identifies the projects and/or goals that the supervisor and employee have agreed on for the next year. Performance measures must also be specified for each of these projects or goals.



mal evaluation, but it does need to be conducted to allow two-way communication on improved performance and career development.

Our department conducts these less-formal reviews on a monthly basis. Supervisors are encouraged to note the positive behaviors, not just the negative ones. All the behaviors are discussed, and should improvement be needed in an area, direction and support are provided.

Supervisors should always keep in mind that they are dealing with people. This is not rocket science by any means. To bring it down to an even simpler level, we should treat

people in the same manner in which we'd like to be treated.

### When and where to evaluate

How often an informal evaluation takes place depends on how often it's needed. At the very least, an employee should have a fair idea how he or she is performing *most of the time*. It isn't good management for a supervisor to point out incidents in which goals have not been met, or to highlight examples of deficient behaviors for the first time during an annual appraisal.

The proper setting is also important. While peer and subordinate

feedback can be invaluable tools when conducting evaluations [Ed.: See "The bottom-up performance appraisal," page 109], you wouldn't want to conduct a company officer's appraisal in front of the entire engine company. A quiet area, free from an audience and any other distractions, would be the optimum environment for conveying your observations.

A word or two about confidentiality: When it comes to keeping notes of informal reviews, other documentation used in making an appraisal, completed formal evaluation forms and any other personnel records, please seek the advice of your personnel department or legal counsel on how and where to keep your files. At a minimum, these records should be kept in a secure area, such as a locked filing cabinet, and access restricted to those who have a need and a right to view them.

### How to evaluate

Proper and specific documentation is definitely the key to success in this process. Notes and files on specific behaviors that a subordinate has exhibited during the review period can serve as a reminder at the time of a formal appraisal, and also lead to factual interpretations. Past instances can be provided to illustrate points, as well as to assist in dispelling inaccurate perceptions on how the ratings were developed. Proper documentation will also become imperative should you have to defend your review legally.

Most formal evaluations require that some sort of form be filled out. While this practice provides guidelines and helps the process to be more objective than subjective, the type of form can present problems. A generic form that's used for all of the governmental entity's employees tends to lead to "pencil-whipping," because it doesn't specifically address what's significant to fire service personnel for exceptional performance, and provides little useful feedback.

While it can be a time-consuming process, forms should be developed for each rank, including the behaviors to be exhibited, goals to be reached, or duties for that particular job, as well as a benchmark to reflect the individual employee's position at the time of the evaluation. (See the sidebar on page 102.)

The supervisor needs to be aware of creating the correct environment for a performance review. As stated before, try to locate a secluded, comfortable and neutral place for the appraisal. You should allow enough time to discuss both positive



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and negative performance points, develop goals with measurable results, and provide feedback and direction without feeling rushed. Advance notice of the review should be provided to subordinates, especially if your evaluation process uses some type of self-assessment.

The supervisor also needs to consider how to deliver constructive criticism and how to handle any negative reactions, as well as how to coach and motivate the employee toward enhanced performance. As the reviewer, you should start out by putting the employee at ease and discussing the intent of the review.

Communicating in a problem-solving format, the supervisor and employee should address any differences in ratings.

Proficiency in listening, being empathetic, resolving conflicts and avoiding defensiveness are invaluable to the process. A supervisor who is adept in interpersonal communication skills tends to be non-threatening, responsive, unbiased, composed and supportive during a formal performance review.

The development of an action plan, identifying areas in which the employee performs well or behaviors that need improvement, as well as

the setting of personal and professional goals, should take place toward the end of the review. Documentation that summarizes what was discussed, what was agreed to and the plan of action should be one of the final steps. In a worst-case scenario, should an employee disagree with your evaluation, an avenue for some type of written response should be available.

### The payoff

A number of benefits arise from the time and effort to do effective employee evaluations. First, for the supervisor, this practice can provide a better understanding of the employee. It also provides an opportunity to hone the team-building, coaching, mentoring, motivating, cheerleading and other skills that are crucial to good leadership.

For the subordinate, knowing where he or she stands is important to security and ego. The review process also provides rewards for effective performance and should eliminate uncertainty about others' perception of his or her performance. It should also provide a clear understanding of career path and employee development.

Last are the benefits to the organization in minimizing marginal performance, making more efficient use of personnel and identifying training needs, all of which assist in providing services to our communities.

Don't practice avoidance. Supervisors need to take the risk of providing useful feedback. Good managers do good evaluations and do them often. Use this opportunity to bolster your professional growth and develop your employees. Properly done, an employee evaluation process will allow you to improve efficiency and morale, and to enhance the organization's ability to adapt to the rapidly changing world. FC

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