

## How to Appraise Employee Performance

### Catch Them Doing Something Good

By Christine Martin

Last month *Library Worklife* featured an article on how employees should prepare for performance evaluations. This month we look at what employers can do to make performance appraisals productive.

It seems employers and employees alike dislike performance appraisals. Employees fear them as remonstrations. Employers put them off as yet another drain on their time. According to Karen McKirchy, author of *Powerful Performance Appraisals: How to Set Expectations and Work Together to Improve Performance* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press, 1998), employers tend to put off employee performance appraisals because supervisors:

1. fear a confrontation;
2. lack interpersonal or interviewing skills;
3. fear “making matters worse by talking about the review;”
4. feel overwhelmed by overly complex appraisal forms that seem to require a supervisor and employee to address everything in one meeting;
5. fear that oversight by the manager’s superior will “overshadow real communication and make the process seem phony;”
6. don’t want to disappoint a good employee when the manager is powerless to deliver a promotion; and
7. don’t want to discuss salary.

Yet, with the advent of legislation that requires employers to demonstrate that factors used to make decisions regarding hiring, firing, and promotion are indeed related to job performance (and not, for example, race, sex, or religion), it seems formal performance appraisals are here to stay.

So how do managers get it right when it comes time to review employee performance?

William Swan, author of *How to Do a Superior Performance Appraisal* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1991), suggests employers avoid these eight common mistakes in employee performance reviews:

1. inadequately defined standards of performance;
2. over-emphasis on recent performance;
3. reliance on gut feelings;
4. miscomprehension of performance standards by employee;
5. insufficient or unclear performance documentation;

6. inadequate time allotted for discussion;
7. too much talking by manager or supervisor; and
8. lack of a follow-up plan.

To avoid these errors, McKirchy suggests that the following steps might help:

- Review the employee's job description. Ask yourself, "What is it that I really want my employee to do?" McKirchy then suggests that "if there's more than a 10 percent change from what's written in the job description, rewrite it! Better yet, write it with your employee." Involving the employee not only helps define relevant standards of performance—after all, who knows the job better than the person doing it—but it also helps employees understand performance standards.
- Keep a performance log. Documenting employee performance is time-consuming, but it makes it easier to write an appraisal that reflects more than recent memory. According to McKirchy, the log should include:
  - date;
  - event;
  - action taken;
  - result; and
  - follow-up information on each employee.

McKirchy suggests that managers pick a time each week to update their logs. She urges managers to "stick to the facts," adding that "personal feelings or opinions will not be helpful to you later." Swan echoes her caution, adding that gut feelings are "notoriously untrustworthy, not legally defensible, and not much use when it comes to giving feedback to the employee." Much better to have concrete evidence to help you 1) explain performance standards or deficiencies to employees, and 2) confirm or modify your gut feelings based on documented facts.

- Schedule adequate time and privacy for the performance review. McKirchy suggests scheduling the meeting in a private room where there will be no interruptions. Of course, she says, no one should begin a performance evaluation while he or she is angry or upset. Her advice: "Make sure . . . you are in control of the issues and your emotions. Decide before the meeting the minimum action you will consider acceptable, what alternative solutions are available, and when you expect performance to improve."
- Let the employee do the talking. McKirchy suggests opening the meeting by saying something like "Let's begin by talking about how you think you're doing on the job. I'd like you to start by telling me several things you think you do particularly well. Please give me specific examples." She then suggests that the supervisor ask the employee to explain how and why he or she is good at the specific skill. For example, "In what ways are you good at relating to customers? What are some of the things you do . . . ?" McKirchy says that this approach establishes a "give-and-take, cooperative" tone, in which the employee actively participates in a discussion of her or his performance.
- Close the meeting by developing a plan for improvement. McKirchy suggests working with the employee to identify not only areas in which he or she excels, but also areas in which improvement is needed. ("Let's talk about another area in which I think you're performing effectively. In fact, I think it's an area in which you could improve. *(Pause)* I'd like to explain my thinking and get your reactions. And I'd like us to reach some agreement on what you could work on to improve your performance over the next couple of months.")

By asking the employee for his or her input regarding his or her performance, the supervisor establishes a cooperative environment in which (ideally) both agree on a plan for improvement. The plan probably will require the employee to do certain things within a given timeframe (e.g., meet deadlines, report for work on time). It may also require the employer to work to remove certain roadblocks or frustrations within the same time frame.

McKirchy suggests working with the employee to prioritize the tasks at hand. ("Why don't you take a few minutes to talk about the specific things that you'd like to be working on in the next few weeks?") According to McKirchy, "the interview should proceed with the supervisor and employee listing all the areas needing work, setting reasonable dates for things that need to be done, and discussing all the ways the supervisor can help the employee achieve the objective."

She suggests writing down the plan and giving the employee a copy as the meeting closes. Schedule follow-up meetings as needed, she says, but don't wait for a formal meeting to give feedback. If you see improvement immediately, let the employee know.

VI. Follow up by "catching your employees doing something good." According to McKirchy, too many employers are

quick to characterize good performance as merely normal (i.e., it's "expected and what they are paid to do.") According to McKirchy, this approach discounts a person's natural pride in his or her work.

So if you're an employer, why not seize an opportunity to build good employee relations without necessarily having to increase compensation? When you see your employee acting on the plan outlined at the performance evaluation meeting, let him know and express your appreciation. Catch him or her doing something good.

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## An Introduction to Followership for Librarians

By **Lore A. Guilmartin**

"Leadership" was one of the catchphrases of the 1990s, taking the place of teamwork, cooperation, and collegiality (Smith 1994, 22). Unfortunately, the recent focus on leadership created an imbalance in the literature of human dynamics by largely ignoring the people who comprise the largest and most important component of any organization: Followers. As changing communication and information networks force library organizations to evolve, we can benefit from the application of followership principles in management as well as everyday performance.

Followership skills include thinking globally, working to benefit others, directing efforts toward the improvement of the organization, and working well as a team member (Smith 1994, 22). A good follower works well with a variety of people, demonstrates a strong work ethic, is task oriented and intrinsically motivated, possesses high self-regard and recognizes his or her ability to make a uniquely valuable contribution to the organization. Instead of criticizing managerial decisions, the good follower finds ways to make managers' decisions work (Kleinsmith & Everts-Rogers 2000, 35-38).

In his book, *The Courageous Follower*, Ira Chaleff expands the role of the effective follower, describing the "courageous follower" as an agent of change who works to recognize leaders' weaknesses and to help leaders to develop (1995, 5). Chaleff offers five dimensions of courageous followership: The courage "to assume responsibility, to serve, to challenge, to participate in transformation, to leave" (Chaleff 1995, 6-7). In attending to these principles the courageous follower becomes a steward of the leader, using his or her unique skills to assist the leader and so to serve the organization as a whole. Chaleff repeatedly acknowledges the difficulty of being a truly courageous follower, recognizing the difficulty of challenging the strong but incorrect opinions of a leader. But he effectively argues that an organization of passive followers is unlikely to succeed over the long term, as its leader becomes distanced from the realities of day-to-day operations and so less likely to make effective and well-informed decisions. As Chaleff states, "Leaders rarely use their power wisely or effectively over long periods unless they are supported by followers who have the stature to help them do so" (1995, 1).

Followership should be encouraged as a necessary precursor to leadership. But the development of followership should not be viewed only as a means to an end, the training of leaders, but rather as an independent and necessary component of effective organizational development. As managers have focused employee development and evaluation processes primarily on leadership skills, at the expense of teamwork, American organizations have been damaged (Smith 1994, 22). Followership research offers one way to correct this imbalance and to improve organizational communication and function. An emphasis on followership makes employees aware of the power they already hold, by encouraging them to communicate honestly and openly with leaders, acknowledging that loyalty to the common purpose is of a much greater importance than the elimination of disagreement.

Employee skill and self-awareness are the most important resources followers bring to an organization. Effective followership involves assessing one's own skills in relation to a job, recognizing and then correcting deficiencies through training and development. Effective followers control this process, rather than depending upon supervisors for assessment and direction (Crockett 1981, 156). By building a sense of pride and self-respect among employees, the encouragement of effective followership improves staff morale and effectiveness.

One of the follower's most important responsibilities is to dispute, and perhaps to refuse to comply with, what he or she perceives to be unwise decisions and policies. Effective followers understand rules and orders within the larger social context, supporting rules which move the organization forward and rejecting those which are immoral or damaging to the organization's mission (Chaleff 1995, 46).

Followership literature is especially relevant to library management. In a general sense, the effective application of followership principles allows the organization to maximize decision-making efficiency and effectiveness. When each employee is empowered to control decision-making and action at each level of the organization, each employee will experience a sense of ownership of and pride in his or her own sphere of influence.

The most significant way in which followership concepts should be applied to library management is by rewarding librarians in non-managerial positions as well as those who choose to enter management. While some will state that leadership is learned (Kouzes & Posner 2003, 97), there seems to be an underlying implication in leadership theory writings that that leadership is a skill that can and should be learned by anyone. Writings on followership instead acknowledge that not every employee will choose to be a leader, nor will all employees perform well in leadership roles. This perspective provides valuable context for library management, echoing as it does the growing development of parallel tracks for career advancement for both managers and non-managers.

The application of followership concepts to library management is a topic ripe for further research. As libraries respond to rapid cultural and technological change, they will depend upon strong followership skills among library staff to ensure their survival and continued success.

In supporting his concept of the courageous follower, Chaleff declares that "there seems to exist the deepest discomfort with the term 'follower'. It conjures up images of docility, conformity, weakness, and failure to excel. Often, none of this is the least bit true. The sooner we move beyond these images and get comfortable with the idea of powerful followers supporting powerful leaders, the sooner we can fully develop and test models for dynamic, self-responsible, synergistic relationships in our organizations" (1995, 3). This is a vital perspective for library managers to develop. Without it, we fall prey to the notion that followers among our employees are failed leaders, or those who have chosen not to lead have an inability to do so. If the majority of any organization's employees are followers, and if followers are viewed as failed leaders, much of the employees' power and the organizations' power are lost. By re-imagining followers as powerful in their own right, libraries can reclaim one of our greatest sources of innovation and superior service: The intellect, strength and skill of library employees.

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