

Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation



APRIL 1994

Law Enforcement

♦ U ♦ L ♦ E ♦ T ♦ I ♦ N



April 1994
Volume 63
Number 4

United States
Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of
Investigation
Washington, DC 20535

Louis J. Freeh
Director

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The Attorney General has
determined that the
publication of this periodical
is necessary in the
transaction of the public
business required by law.
Use of funds for printing this
periodical has been
approved by the Director of
the Office of Management
and Budget.

The *FBI Law Enforcement
Bulletin* (ISSN-0014-5688)
is published monthly by the
Federal Bureau of
Investigation, 10th and
Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.,
Washington, D.C. 20535.
Second-Class postage paid
at Washington, D.C., and
additional mailing offices.
Postmaster: Send address
changes to *FBI Law
Enforcement Bulletin*,
Federal Bureau of
Investigation, Washington,
D.C. 20535.

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Features

Focus on Personnel

ASPIRES: A Solution to the Midcareer Plateau

By Scott A. Johnson

1

*Budget-conscious police
administrators can slay the "plateau
dragon" with this cost-effective
career development program.*

Promotion and Advancement in the 1990s

By Ira Grossman and Jack Doherty

10

*A lack of promotional opportunities
requires law enforcement
administrators to pursue other
avenues to provide a satisfying work
atmosphere.*

Performance Appraisal

By Dennis B. Anderson

18

*Supervisors can take the pain
out of the appraisal process.*

Police Pension and Retirement System

By Ted G. Carlton

23

*Oklahoma's deferred option
retirement plan benefits both
employees and law enforcement
agencies.*

Attorney's Fees in Civil Litigation

By William U. McCormack

28

*Litigation strategies to better control
potential civil liability exist for law
enforcement defendants.*

Departments

5 Notable Speeches
Violent Crime

15 Sound Off
Aggressive Policing

8 Bulletin Reports

26 Book Reviews

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Performance Appraisal A Different Approach

By
DENNIS B. ANDERSON, M.P. A.

What two words strike fear in supervisors and subordinates alike? Performance appraisal. The performance appraisal process often makes everyone tense, perhaps because many supervisors have little training in the objectives,

foundations, and delivery of performance appraisals. They use the "rearview mirror" approach, which focuses on past performance.¹ This puts employees on the defensive and wastes valuable time.

Furthermore, supervisors often fail to realize that the performance appraisal process is just that—a process. They need to view appraisals not as a once-a-year chore but as a productive procedure that continues throughout the year. Evaluation interviews, although considered by many employees to be the entire

appraisal, are just one part of an overall strategy.

THE APPRAISAL PROCESS

Attitude Is Important

Supervisors must remember that the primary goal of performance appraisal is to improve performance. To assist in achieving this objective, supervisors must first create an atmosphere in which employees will be motivated to perform.

"Management by walking around" can be a useful technique in developing a good working relationship with employees. Supervisors who take a few minutes to visit with employees in their work areas show an interest in their employees

and a confidence to engage in discussion on the employees' own "turf." This can be an opportunity to inquire about their performance, compliment them, and to listen to them, thereby encouraging feedback.

Supervisors must not only be managers by doing things right but they also must be



leaders. Leadership means "doing the right things," such as being a coach, a facilitator, and even a cheerleader. Leaders should also "walk the way they talk." In other words, they must set the tone for change and become role models for employees. Employees cannot be motivated toward a work attitude or ethic if it is not exhibited by the supervisor.

Equally important, supervisors must realize that employees deserve respect. They should not be so concerned with the organization's bottom line that they forget to treat employees like human beings.

In that regard, supervisors often use evaluations to target their employees' weaknesses. Instead, they should emphasize strengths on which the employee can build. To accomplish this, the appraisal process should follow a performance management cycle.²

The Performance Management Cycle

The cycle begins with the supervisor defining the roles and responsibilities of subordinates. Employees cannot perform adequately if they do not know what their supervisors expect of them. Expectations should be clearly defined, with input from employees. This important step shows employees how they contribute to the overall strategy of the organization.

Next, the supervisor and the employee, together, set specific goals for the employee to achieve, depending on the employee's duties, responsibilities, and work assignments. While objectives should

be specific, they should not be so narrowly defined that supervisors fail to account for extenuating circumstances that might cause employees not to meet the standard. For example, requiring employees to complete a specific number of assignments each month does not take into consideration the complexity and difficulty of each assignment, which might limit progress. Supervisors and employees should also develop strategies for attaining these goals and decide which method the supervisor will use to monitor employee progress.

The supervisor then coaches the employee. This means monitoring performance and providing corrective feedback or revising expectations, when necessary.

Finally, the supervisor reviews performance with the employee. This means frequent, regularly scheduled meetings, not a yearly

evaluation. Monthly reviews are one way to check employees' progress on a continual basis.

The success of the performance management cycle depends on supervisors and employees working together. This way, they establish realistic goals, and employees are more likely to use their strengths, while recognizing and overcoming their weaknesses. Supervisors must also remember that they are evaluating performance, not their employees' personality characteristics.

Inherent in the performance management cycle, feedback is the key element in a successful performance evaluation. With feedback, employees can better gauge their performance, and supervisors learn the most effective ways to motivate them. As a result, supervisors can approach the appraisal process in a positive manner, feeling more like helpers than judges.³

“

...the primary goal of performance appraisal is to improve performance.

”



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The Evaluation Interview

Because supervisors should view the evaluation interview as the beginning, not the end, of the appraisal process, they should use the interview to plan for the future, rather than to dwell on the past. Accordingly, they should devote approximately 60 percent of the appraisal to planning the future, 30 percent to analyzing the present, and a mere 10 percent to reviewing the past.

During the interview, interaction between the supervisor and the employee should reinforce present behavior if the employee is performing well, suggest behavior changes if the employee needs to improve performance, or develop a new behavior if the employee receives new tasks or assignments.⁴ To do this, supervisors should:

- Provide a clear reason for the performance evaluation

- Present positive and negative feedback in a fostering, nonthreatening atmosphere
- Resolve conflicts and problems through participative dialogue
- Set specific goals to improve job performance
- Provide support and encouragement to the employee.⁵

Simply put, a viable performance evaluation interview that

Performance Appraisal Evaluation Old vs. New Method

	Performance Appraisal (Old)	Focus on Achievement (New)
Goal	Evaluation	Achievement
Supervisor	Controls Program	Partnership
Employee	Passive	Initiator
View	Rearview Mirror	Prospective
Timing	Once a year	Ongoing
Theme	Control	Sharing
Criteria	Manager Determines	Mutually Determined
Individual Vision	Not Discussed	Basis for Plan
Atmosphere	Confrontational	Supportive

Source: Ronald W. Clement, "Performance Appraisal: Nonverbal Influences on the Rating Process," *Public Personnel Administration*, Spring 1987, 14-27.

encompasses the critical aspects of the appraisal process is Meaningful, Enjoyable, Educational, and Traceable (MEET).⁶ In other words, the interview should be a results-oriented, developmental process, with supervisors presenting verifiable, fact-based information in a positive, relaxed atmosphere. The interview should also cover opportunities for growth within the current job assignment but should be limited to a few important items that are both evident and achievable. For example, employees might receive responsibility for important projects or attend seminars in their areas of expertise.

Followup

Often, supervisors find performance evaluations difficult because they do not discuss performance with their employees between evaluations. Understandably, then, the annual performance evaluation becomes a tense experience for all.

To avoid this, effective supervisors follow up on the performance evaluation and ensure that efforts to improve performance continue throughout the year. They evaluate what they have learned about employees, identifying what employees did well, what they did poorly, and what they should do differently in the future. Followup also helps supervisors to see how they can best interact with and motivate employees.

Experienced supervisors recognize the importance of followup in the evaluation process. In fact, when municipal executives were asked in a survey to identify factors

that contribute to the effectiveness of performance evaluations, they named regular performance reviews as one of the top three.⁷

CAVEATS

While this method of evaluation means actively involving employees in the process, supervisors must be careful not to place too much of a burden on employees. Supervisors are still ultimately responsible for ensuring that employees are performing to their full potential.



The new approach to successful performance appraisal...provides for a plan of achievement, not merely a judgment.



In this regard, the acronym ACHIEVE provides a list of important factors for supervisors to use in evaluating employee performance.⁸ ACHIEVE stands for:

- **Ability:** Has the supervisor ensured that employees possess the skills required to perform assignments?
- **Clarity:** Has the supervisor clearly explained the goals and objectives of performance to employees?
- **Help:** Has the supervisor offered assistance to

employees in the performance of their duties?

- **Incentive:** Has the supervisor provided employees with a reason (challenge, praise, recognition, etc.) to perform?
- **Evaluation:** Does the supervisor provide employees with regular feedback on their performance?
- **Validity:** Has the supervisor used proper techniques to judge and evaluate employees' performance?
- **Environment:** Does something beyond employees' control affect their performance?

By considering these factors, supervisors look to themselves for answers before holding employees accountable for their lack of performance.

CONCLUSION

In surveys, 25 percent of workers believe they are not working to full potential; 75 percent say they could be more effective, and 60 percent say they are not working as hard as they have in the past.⁹ An effective appraisal process can help supervisors to tap into their employees' potential.

Supervisors need to view performance appraisals as a participative process and to approach them with a positive attitude. Skilled supervisors feel more like coaches and counselors than judges.

Counseling assists those employees who are not performing to their full potential, whereas coaching helps all employees to achieve their highest possible levels of

performance. The degree to which supervisors accept these relationships determines whether employees and the organization achieve established goals and objectives.

The new approach to successful performance appraisal, in comparison to old methods, provides for a plan of achievement, not merely a judgment. Supervisors should view performance appraisals as an ongoing and developmental process. This process is based on a relationship of trust and confidence between supervisors and employees. For those supervisors who make the effort to challenge employees in a positive atmosphere, the rewards can be very fulfilling for the employee, the supervisor, and the organization. ♦

Endnotes

¹ Joseph P. McCarthy, "A New Focus on Achievement," *Personnel Journal*, February 1991, 74-78.

² Craig E. Schneier, Arthur Geis, and Joseph A. Wert, "Performance Appraisals: No Appointment Needed," *Personnel Journal*, November 1991, 80-87.

³ Ronald W. Clement, "Performance Appraisal: Nonverbal Influences on the Rating Process," *Public Personnel Administration*, Spring 1987, 14-27.

⁴ Mike Deblieux, "Performance Reviews Support the Quest for Quality," *H.R. Focus*, November 1991, 3-4.

⁵ Bernard P. Maroney and M.R. Buckely, "Does Research in Performance Appraisal Influence the Practice of Performance Appraisal?" *Public Personnel Management*, Summer 1992, 185-195.

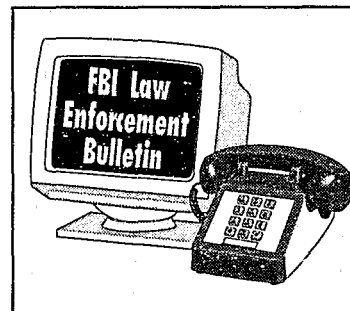
⁶ Jerry Conrad, *Performance Evaluations—Who's Really in Charge?* Custom Training, Inc., 1991.

⁷ David N. Ammons, "Executive Satisfaction with Managerial Performance Appraisal in City Government," *Public Personnel Administration*, December 1987, 33-48.

⁸ *Supra* note 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*

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