



4 Performance Evaluation Pitfalls Your Agency Should Avoid

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Broken performance evaluation systems damage public safety agencies across the country in two ways. First, they inaccurately give positive documentation to officers that is later used to reverse important disciplinary decisions in court or in arbitration. Second, by selecting “meets expectations,” supervisors are denying performance merits to officers who have earned much greater recognition.

More often than not, it seems that supervisors view the completion of annual performance evaluations to be a tedious chore that they have to undertake once a year with little genuine regard for why we are conducting these evaluations and how they are helping the subordinate, the supervisor or the agency.

This dim view of performance evaluations by supervisors often results from four fundamental problems in the process. So, as public safety professionals, you may want to ask yourself if these common mistakes are harming your agency operations.

1—The Evaluation criteria has no real relationship to day-to-day job responsibilities.

Often the criteria by which officers, deputies, firefighters and other public safety personnel are “graded” is **so generic as to be seen as meaningless.** These criteria could often apply to the personnel in parks and recreations, the public library or any other facet of government—all important jobs but ones that have no nuts and bolts similarities to the work of a police officer or firefighter. In fact, **some local governments essentially create city-wide or county-wide evaluation forms that inevitably fail to take into account the unique “nuts and bolts” of the various jobs included under that umbrella.**

If you want your evaluations to be a meaningful communication of how well a patrol officer is coming along (where they have room for improvement and areas where they should keep up the good work) then the criteria should be directly related to their unique job description. Furthermore, **ask the question:**

what do our patrol sergeants expect to see from their people on a given shift? Those are the criteria that should be reflected on the evaluation forms rather than generic categories that essentially amounts to “*gets along well with others.*”

2—Requiring Additional Documentation Based on the Quality of the “Grade” Given

Most men and women drawn to public safety are not in it for the paperwork. They already feel that they are buried in administrative tasks as it is. Why would we communicate to them that a “needs improvement” grade or an “exceeds expectations” grade will trigger a new round of paperwork assignments while a “meets expectations” grade requires basically no documented justification whatsoever? **The unintended consequence of such a system is to encourage supervisors to “circle down the middle”—regardless of the subordinate’s performance—in order to avoid documentation** that is not only time-consuming but requires the supervisor to recall specific incidents of misconduct or exemplary work spanning 12 months.

If you want to require documentation to support ratings, consider requiring the same amount of documentation regardless of the *quality* of the grade. The desire to avoid paperwork is a powerful incentive to overlook performance problems as well as excellence. **Removing that inherent incentive to “circle down the middle” may be a necessity.**

3—Averaging Scores Across the Board

There are some areas of public safety work that are essential to an individual’s ability to safely fulfill their obligation to the agency and the community. And a severe deficiency in one area does not necessarily mean that there are similar deficiencies across other areas of daily work performance. However, **an overall positive evaluation may well be an inaccurate reflection of the fact that the severe deficiency in one particular area could result in significant discipline, including termination, if there is not substantial improvement.**

For instance, a patrol deputy could show up promptly for every shift in appropriate attire, show pro-activity in initiating stops for serious traffic violations, respond promptly to calls for service and do so with little or no complaints from the public as a result of the fact that he is professional in his dealings with the public. The only problem is that he is a dangerously incompetent driver. He “needs improvement” in his skills as a driver and his accidents and close calls are duly documented on his performance evaluation. But his overall grade as a deputy is “meets expectations” due to his proficiency in other areas.

Can an individual’s deficiencies in a key safety area be *so significant* that an overall “meets expectations” is *not* a fair reflection of their need to address performance issues? Furthermore, could these deficiencies be so significant in one key area that it is unethical for an agency to allow him to remain employed in his

current capacity without substantial improvement? It seems obvious that the answers to these questions is a clear yes.

If you want to give individuals a general sense of how they are performing overall, while they may exceed expectations in some areas but need improvement in others, **consider the caveat that a “needs improvement” in particular key areas renders an overall grading of “meets expectations” as an impossibility. Fundamentally, a patrol deputy is expected to demonstrate proficiency in following lawful directives, driving ability, firearms proficiency, professional communication with the public and adherence to protocol related to officer safety in making stops and responding to calls for service. It would seem impossible that a deputy could consistently fail in one of these areas while simultaneously meeting a supervisor’s standards set forth for the position of deputy.** Your evaluations should reflect this common-sense reality.

4—Tying Merit Pay Raises to Obtaining a Particular Grade

The idea of tying pay raises to performance *sounds* like a good one. Well-intentioned local political leaders are often enthusiastic to pass rules and legislation requiring, for instance, that only those who “exceed expectations” in their performance be justly rewarded with a pay raise. **They assume this will encourage public safety personnel to strive for excellence and ensure that excellence is rewarded. The reality tends to be starkly different.**

Very quickly, merit pay raises are seen by those within the agency as an overdue pay raise for all department members. Therefore, a supervisor’s decision to indicate anything lower than “exceeds expectations” is nothing short of taking money out of somebody’s pocket. The reluctance of supervisors to accurately identify performance problems in this environment is often predictable. Supervisors often reason that, **“I know she’s not getting the job done and she’s causing more problems than she solves when she’s working...but we haven’t had a pay increase in five years and I’m not going to take money out of her pocket”.**

So, an employee who is the source of constant problems now has a piece of paper from her subordinate stating that she is doing great. And that piece of paper may well become very relevant if the agency decides to deny her a promotion, suspend her or even terminate her at some point in the future. “If she’s been such a problem”, the argument will be in court or in arbitration, “then why did the agency consistently grade her as an excellent employee?”

If there is funding available for merit pay raises, agency leaders should consider advocating an across the board pay increase in light of the nation-wide prominence of the unintended consequences associated with tying pay increases to positive performance evaluations. Inflating evaluation grades across the agency can have extremely detrimental effects when agency leaders attempt to make disciplinary decisions down the road.