



Why are We Grading Performance Evaluations?

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Why are we conducting performance evaluations and how are they making our agencies better? Ask this question to groups of sergeants, command staff, chiefs and sheriffs across the country and you will get shrugs, smirks, and eye rolls. It is the fundamental question that often gets lost in the day-to-day realities of personnel management in law enforcement.

The official, textbook answers to these questions tend to fall somewhere along the lines of the following:

Regular performance evaluations are intended to ensure (1) that supervisors are communicating clear performance objectives to subordinates, (2) that subordinates are aware of their areas of needed improvement as well as the areas in which they excel, and (3) any questions associated with subordinate performance are answered and performance objectives are clarified with specificity.

Performance evaluations improve agency functions by providing a pre-disciplinary setting in which to address performance deficiencies as early as possible before formal discipline is necessary and before performance issues results in significant damage to agency operations.

These types of policy manual descriptions are rooted in a **simple idea: supervisors should be continuously “kicking tires” and evaluating the work being done by their officers to find problems early and “nip them in the bud”** as quickly as possible. This is in the interest of the individual officer who is under-performing and in the interest of the agency. **But how are the benefits of continuous communication and early intervention affected by forcing supervisors to grade or rate their subordinates through annual evaluations?**

How Attaching Ratings to Evaluations Hurts Communication

Accurately evaluating performance and communicating expectations to subordinates—whether on the side of the road after a traffic stop, or as part of a pre-scheduled performance appraisal meeting—inevitably involves difficult conversations. Many law enforcement supervisors seem more comfortable confronting violent offenders on the street than they are confronting a subordinate at the

precinct. **This tendency to shy away from confrontation with subordinates is often exacerbated by the fact that, beyond a difficult conversation and documentation of areas of some deficiency, the subordinate is getting a “failing grade” in the form of a number or rating that amounts to a *D* or an *F*.**

In most agencies, officers don't grieve the narrative facts of the evaluation—they grieve the grade. Many supervisors and officers readily admit that, **as long as they are receiving positive ratings on the evaluation, officers don't even bother to read the narrative notes and comments.** This is a huge problem—the notes and comments are supposed to be the point of the evaluation, *not* the rating score.

How Attaching Rating Scores to Evaluations Impacts Defensible Promotions and Discipline

Broken performance evaluations that don't accurately reflect the realities on the ground can do a great deal of damage to a department. They can de-motivate high-level performers who are keenly aware of the fact that their pay and evaluations are the same as the “bad apple” in the unit. They can undermine, or even demoralize, supervisors who feel that they are expected to “check a box” without causing any waves rather than actively taking ownership of their subordinates' conduct in furtherance of their duties. But possibly the worst outcome is that **broken performance evaluations can often serve as “get out of jail free cards” for the worst officers in the agency.**

The pressure to circle a 3, or “meets expectations,” can be strong when the supervisor knows that circling anything less than that puts the onus on the supervisor to meticulously document why the performance is substandard, how long it has been a problem, and what the supervisor plans to do to improve it.

When the time comes to suspend, demote, or even terminate an officer, stacks of these yearly “meets expectations” evaluations—no matter how truly inaccurate—prove to be one of the best friends that a “bad apple” officer ever had.

What if We Conducted Feedback Sessions Without Grades?

What if a supervisor sat down every 3 or 6 months with every subordinate and briefly went over a couple of pages of concrete feedback? What if the supervisor laid out the positives, the negatives, and their expectations moving forward? Then, what if the supervisor simply required an acknowledgment of receipt signature from the subordinate *without* attaching a grade?

If an officer is demonstrating significant deficiencies, the supervisor should be engaging in progressive discipline—beginning with “knock it off” verbal warnings and continuing with more formal performance improvement plans. If an officer is outstanding—the agency should consider how excellence is recognized within the organization, whether through commendation or some other form of formal recognition.

But if an officer is neither a problem employee nor an outstanding performer, why are agencies spending time handing out grades? After all, the narrative feedback between the grades is supposed to be the

rationale for conducting these evaluations in the first place. **What better way to minimize the risk of the rating score becoming the focal point than to get rid of it all together?**

This idea is far from guaranteed to have a positive impact on agencies' personnel management. If what your agency has done for years isn't working, however, then it might be time to try something different.

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