



## **4 Performance Evaluation Pitfalls Law Enforcement Leaders Should Avoid**

[Matt Dolan, J.D.](#)

**March, 2026**

*Why are we conducting performance evaluations and how are they making our agencies better?* These are fundamental questions for the many law enforcement agencies that require standardized performance evaluations for their officers. Without clear answers to these questions, supervisors often find themselves pursuing the path of least resistance when it comes to conducting performance evaluations—to the detriment of the officers they lead and to the mission of their agencies.

This path of least resistance typically means marking “meets expectations” on evaluations because, after all, no news is good news. This path is understandably tempting for supervisors but can result in serious departmental problems related to legal liability in discipline and promotions—not to mention the potential impact on officer morale when the formal evaluation system devolves into the adult equivalent of an end-of-the-season pizza party where every kid gets a trophy.

So, again, *why are we conducting performance evaluations and how are they making our agencies better?* The “textbook” answers to these questions are straightforward and are generally outlined in agency policy manuals.

*Why are we conducting performance evaluations?* We conduct these evaluations to ensure that supervisors give subordinates detailed feedback regarding their current performance, areas of needed improvement, and reasonable supervisor expectations moving forward. *How are they making our agencies better?* This process improves agency operations by ensuring that supervisors and subordinates are “on the same page,” expectations are clear, and performance issues do not result from employees’ ignorance of stated standards or clear agency priorities.

**Unfortunately, for too many law enforcement agencies, the honest answers to these fundamental questions about performance evaluations are something like the following: *We do them because we are required to do them and because we’ve always done them, and as far as how they are making the agency better—your guess is as good as mine.***

It would be bad enough if these evaluation systems simply failed to offer productive results in the form of detailed and documented feedback on officers’ strengths, weaknesses, and ongoing progress. *Even worse*, however, is the fact that broken performance evaluations actually damage agencies across the country in two distinct and important ways. (1) They inaccurately give positive performance documentation to problem officers which is later used to reverse disciplinary decisions in court or in arbitration. (2) They give standard “meets expectations” evaluation scores to officers whose stellar performance merits much greater recognition.

**So, even worse than no documentation at all in the area of officer performance, broken performance evaluation systems actually serve to document things that just are not so.**

### **Pitfall #1: Evaluation criteria that has no real relationship to day-to-day job responsibilities**

The set of criteria by which law enforcement officers are “graded” is often so generic that it is likely to be seen as meaningless by supervisors and rank and file officers alike. These criteria could often apply to the personnel in parks and recreation, the public library, or any other facet of government—all important jobs, but ones that have little or no practical similarities to the work of a law enforcement officer. In fact, some local governments create city-wide or county-wide evaluation forms that inevitably fail to take into account the unique nature of the various jobs included under that broad umbrella.

If you want your evaluations to provide an opportunity for meaningful communication regarding how well patrol officers are performing, where there is room for improvement, and areas where they should keep up the good work, then the criteria should be directly related to each unique job description. The same is true of deputies working in the jail or detectives working in investigations.

Furthermore, ask questions like the following: **What do our patrol sergeants expect to see from their people on a given shift? Do expectations differ on the night shift versus the day shift? Do expectations depend upon call volume on a given shift? How do day-to-day expectations vary for officers working in investigative units, as opposed to those working on patrol?**

Answering these questions and crafting performance criteria to reflect the answers is essential to creating meaningful performance evaluations. Without putting this effort into improving performance evaluation systems, it seems very likely that many police supervisors will continue to half-heartedly complete evaluation forms filled with generic categories that essentially amount to “gets along well with others.”

### **Pitfall #2: Requiring additional documentation based on the quality of the “grade” given**

Most men and women drawn to law enforcement are not in it for the paperwork. Supervisors tend to feel that they are already buried in too many administrative tasks as it is. So it is predictable that when agency leaders communicate, even unintentionally, to supervisors that a “needs improvement” grade or an “exceeds expectations” grade will trigger a new round of paperwork assignments, while a “meets expectations” grade requires minimal “copy and paste” documentation, that many supervisors will take the path of least resistance.

**The unintended consequence of such a system is to encourage supervisors to “circle down the middle”—regardless of the individual officer’s performance—in order to avoid time-consuming documentation that requires the supervisor to recall specific incidents of misconduct or exemplary work spanning many months. If you 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 and to forego efforts to properly recognize excellence. Removing the inherent incentive to “circle down the middle” would seem necessary to improve the effectiveness of performance evaluations systems in law enforcement.

**Pitfall #3: Averaging scores across the board, regardless of severe deficiency in any particular area**

There are areas of law enforcement work that are essential to an individual’s ability to safely fulfill his or her obligation to the agency and the community. And a severe deficiency in *just one* of these areas could render the officer unfit to do the job, even if that performance issue does not necessarily mean that there are similar deficiencies across other areas of daily work performance.

Therefore, an *overall* positive performance evaluation, which results from averaging performance assessments across a wide range of job requirements, may well be an inaccurate reflection of officer fitness for duty—particularly if there is a severe deficiency in one critical area that 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 proactivity in initiating stops for serious traffic violations, respond promptly to calls for service, and do so with few complaints from the public. The only problem is that the deputy is a dangerously incompetent driver, desperately “needs improvement” in emergency vehicle operations, and causes accidents and close calls on a regular basis that are duly documented in the annual performance evaluation. But the deputy’s *overall* grade as a deputy is “meets expectations” based on proficiency in other areas.

An individual’s deficiencies in a key safety area, such as safely operating a squad car, be so significant that an overall grade of “meets expectations” does *not* accurately reflect the need for addressing a particular performance deficiency. Furthermore, these deficiencies could be so significant in one key area that it is unethical for an agency to allow the officer to remain employed in their current capacity without substantial improvement. Therefore, the approach of averaging assessment scores across the board may well serve to damage agency operations by “muddying

the waters” as it pertains to improving an officer’s performance in a single key area of job performance.

Fundamentally, a patrol deputy is expected to demonstrate proficiency in following lawful directives, in driving ability, in firearms, in professional communication with the public, and in following protocol related to officer safety in making stops and responding to calls for service, and much more. It would seem impossible that a deputy could consistently and severely fail *in even one* of these areas while simultaneously meeting the agency’s reasonable standards set forth for the position. Evaluations should reflect this commonsense reality.

#### **Pitfall #4: Tying merit-based pay raises to particular “grades”**

The idea of giving pay increases based on performance *sounds* like a good one. Well-intentioned elected officials and police administrators are often enthusiastic to create policies and legislation requiring, for instance, that those who “exceed expectations” in their performance be justly rewarded with a pay raise. They assume this will encourage public employees to strive for excellence and will ensure that excellence is rewarded.

The *reality* tends to be starkly different. Very quickly, merit-based pay raises often become seen by those within the agency as overdue pay raises for all department members. Therefore, a supervisor’s decision to indicate anything lower than the grade required to obtain a pay increase—whether that is “meets expectations” or “exceeds expectations”—is seen as nothing short of taking money out of an officer’s pocket.

**Supervisors’ reluctance to accurately identify performance problems in this environment is predictable. They often reason that, “I know he’s not getting the job done and he causes more problems than he solves when he’s working...but we haven’t had a pay increase in years and I’m not going to take money out of his pocket. He has a family.” So, an officer who is the source of constant problems now has a piece of paper—an official internal document with agency letterhead and his supervisor’s signature—stating that he is doing great work.**

**And that piece of paper may become very relevant if the agency decides to deny him a promotion, suspend him, or even terminate him at some point in the future. “If he’s been such a problem,” the argument will be in court or in arbitration, “then why did the agency consistently grade him as an excellent employee?”**

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

### **About the Author**

#### **Matt Dolan, J.D.**

Matt Dolan is a licensed attorney who specializes in training and advising public safety agencies in matters of legal liability, risk management, and ethical leadership. His training focuses on helping agency leaders create ethically and legally sound policies, procedures, and practices as a proactive means of minimizing liability and maximizing agency effectiveness.

A member of a law enforcement family dating back three generations, he serves as both Director and Public Safety Instructor with Dolan Consulting Group.

In December of 2024, he published his first book, [\*Police Liability: A Guide for Law Enforcement Leaders of All Ranks\*](#).

His training courses include [\*Supervisor Liability for Law Enforcement\*](#), [\*Background Investigations in Law Enforcement\*](#), and [\*Internal Affairs: Legal Liability and Best Practices\*](#).