

Employee Evaluations

Workshop 7

At a cable TV company, Sandy supervises the installers—the technicians who set up cable service in houses and apartments. Part of her job is to conduct performance reviews. She believes she is fair and straight-forward. Today, however, she is troubled about the yearly review session she had yesterday with Zahida.



In the class for new installers that Sandy taught last year, Zahida was a star pupil. Sandy expected her to be a whiz at the job, and she has been—except that a lot of her customers call afterward with minor concerns. They wonder why the cable box is next to the flower bed. Or they say they don't understand the WiFi hookup.

In the performance review, Sandy began by praising Zahida's technical expertise. Then Sandy came to what she called "the customer relations problem." She said, "Too many of your customers have been acting confused,

phoning in with questions. So you should take more time to explain how the system works, why you've installed it a certain way, and so on. That's part of doing the job right."

To Sandy's surprise, Zahida became agitated. "Nobody warned me there were too many calls," she said. "And if the questions are trivial, why should it matter? You know, some customers think a woman can't do a technical job. You said my 'expertise' was great, but now you're judging me by what ignorant people don't know. That's unfair!"

Zahida was so unhappy that Sandy ended the interview abruptly, saying, "We'll talk about this when you're calmer." Sandy still believes her critique was justified, but she ponders how she could improve her evaluation techniques in the future.

What's Inside

Here, you will learn to

- ◆ explain the reasons for employee evaluations
- ◆ follow guidelines for effective evaluation
- ◆ take appropriate disciplinary measures

Why Evaluate?

As a supervisor, you will make informal evaluations all the time. You'll judge how well employees are performing, and at times you'll need to communicate your conclusions to them and to your own boss.

Perhaps you will also do formal reviews like the one described in the scenario you've just read. Many organizations schedule regular performance appraisals at least once a year. The results are put in writing and become part of the employee's record.

Such formal occasions can inspire dread in both employees and supervisors. Employees are anxious about having their faults pointed out. Supervisors dread having to explain how an employee isn't measuring up to expectations, and they worry that employees will resent being judged.

If evaluations are so painful, you may be thinking, why bother doing them on a regular basis? Why not save them for special occasions?



There are several reasons for regular performance appraisals:

- ◆ They make you take time for a thorough consideration of each employee's progress.
- ◆ They help both you and the employee identify problem areas and work out solutions before the difficulties escalate.
- ◆ They give you a chance to convey praise and admiration for the employee's accomplishments.
- ◆ They provide the basis for awarding promotions and raises.
- ◆ They allow you to describe your expectations for the employee's future performance.
- ◆ Employees who know where they stand can make more informed career decisions.
- ◆ If an employee must eventually be fired, the formal evaluations provide important documentation, helping the company avoid lawsuits and charges of unfairness.

Performance evaluations, then, are a necessary chore. No special technique can make them a delightful task. But if you work at improving your skills, you can avoid much of the mutual dread that accompanies performance appraisals. Most important, you can achieve an outcome in which both you and the employee feel that something useful has been accomplished.

If [people] demand little of themselves, they will remain stunted. If they demand a good deal of themselves, they will grow . . . without any more effort than is expended by the nonachiever.

— **PETER F. DRUCKER**

The Effective Executive

ACTIVITY 7.1

NAME _____

Evaluating Your Own Evaluation

To be a good evaluator, you have to imagine how your employees feel about the process. Think back to a time when you received an evaluation at work or in school that was at least partly critical of your performance. Then answer the following questions:

1. In what ways was the evaluation accurate?

2. In what ways was the evaluation inaccurate, unfair, or incomplete?

3. What was the effect of the evaluation on your subsequent performance?

4. How could the evaluator have made the procedure better and more useful?

Guidelines for Evaluating Employees

Organizations use a variety of methods for employee evaluations. You may receive a form with just a few basic questions, followed by spaces for you to write out your comments in detail. Or you may receive a form that lists many separate categories, such as “quality of work,” “ability to meet schedules,” “cooperation with fellow workers,” and so on. Perhaps the form will ask you to use a numerical scale or choose among ratings like “outstanding,” “superior,” “average,” and “below average.”

All of these formats have advantages and disadvantages. In an open-ended format, you can more easily describe the nuances of the employee’s performance. However, it is sometimes hard to avoid subjectivity in writing—and later in interpreting—such evaluations. The more structured formats are easier to use and interpret—and possibly more objective—but they give less attention to the individuality of each employee.



You have to respect
your people and their abilities.
In turn, you have to earn their
respect; you can’t command it.

— **TIM RIESTER**

*President of Riester-Robb
Advertising*

Whichever format your organization asks you to use, you can benefit from following these guidelines:

- ◆ Explain the evaluation process at the time employees are hired. Tell them when and where evaluations will take place, what method of evaluation will be used, what performance standards will be used, and what will be evaluated.
- ◆ Make sure the employee knows in advance the performance standards he or she is expected to meet. One way is to involve employees in setting their own goals.
- ◆ If there are significant problems with the employee’s work, he or she should have received feedback about them before the formal performance review. Try not to spring any surprises.
- ◆ During the evaluation process, involve employees in identifying steps to take for making any needed changes and improvements. This creates a more collaborative process and encourages employees to take responsibility for achieving goals.
- ◆ Allot plenty of time to prepare for the appraisal interview. Nothing you say or write should be hasty.

- ◆ Be fully aware of what your organization will do with your written reports. In narrative comments, be especially careful of the words you choose. You don't want to give the wrong impression to managers who read the evaluations later.
- ◆ Take full account of the experience and training of the employee. Was he or she properly equipped to do the tasks?
- ◆ Be as specific as possible in your remarks. Give examples. For instance, rather than saying "You've often been late for work," say, "You've been at least ten minutes late seven times in the last month."
- ◆ Review the performance, not the person. Some supervisors favor the people they like. Others try so hard to avoid that problem that they do the opposite. It's difficult to be completely unbiased, but you have to try as hard as you can.
- ◆ Discuss the good as well as the bad.
- ◆ Don't speak or write comparisons between one employee and another. You may think to yourself, "Janet is catching on much faster than Dave," but if you tell Dave he's not doing as well as Janet, you're asking for trouble.

The Sandwich Technique

Many successful supervisors conduct evaluation interviews with a method known as the sandwich technique. First, they stress the employee's strengths and accomplishments. Then they note any problems or weaknesses. Finally, they return to positive remarks, showing how the employee can remedy the problems and build on his or her strengths. By "sandwiching" the bad news between more positive remarks, the supervisors avoid overemphasizing the negative, and they convey their own solid support for the employee.

- ◆ Rely on your first-hand evidence, not on what someone else has said.
- ◆ Review the entire time period in question, not just the most recent or most memorable events.
- ◆ Choose a quiet and private place for the interview, preferably one where the employee can feel relaxed.
- ◆ Emphasize that the evaluation is designed to help the employee continue to grow and develop in the job.
- ◆ Encourage the employee to ask questions and seek clarification of your remarks.
- ◆ Ask the employee to suggest a plan for improvement or for developing further skills.
- ◆ Don't cut the interview short if the employee expresses anger or bewilderment about your critiques. He or she has a right to react to what you're saying.
- ◆ Try to end the discussion on a positive note, agreeing with the employee on new goals for the next evaluation period.

ACTIVITY 7.2

NAME _____

Evaluating Sandy

Look back at the scenario at the beginning of this workshop. On the basis of what you've learned about effective evaluation, identify four mistakes that Sandy made and describe how she could have improved the process:

Mistake 1: _____

A better approach: _____

Mistake 2: _____

A better approach: _____

Mistake 3: _____

A better approach: _____

Mistake 4: _____

A better approach: _____

Disciplining Employees

At times, as a supervisor, you may face the unpleasant task of having to discipline an employee. Disciplinary measures often result from infractions of specific company rules. Discipline may also be necessary if an employee repeatedly fails to meet performance standards.

You set the basis for good discipline by making performance standards clear and seeing that all employees are familiar with company policies. These preventive measures are especially important with new workers.

If, despite your best efforts to coach and educate your employees, you're forced to take disciplinary action, you will want to make that action as effective as possible. In fact, some management theorists insist that discipline can be not only effective but also positive, benefiting both the company and the employee. In the most extreme cases, positive discipline may be an unreachable standard, but the following sections will help you strive for that ideal.

Stages of Discipline

Discipline usually proceeds through a number of stages, from mild to severe, depending on the nature and frequency of the infraction.

Stage 1: Oral warning or reprimand. In many ways, providing an oral warning or reprimand is similar to offering criticism, and you should follow the same guidelines you read about in Workshop 6. For example, a warning should be prompt, accurate, private, and focused on behavior rather than on personalities. If the employee did not fully understand what was required of him or her, the reprimand should also include an explanation of the relevant rule or standard.

However, an oral warning or reprimand is often sterner than ordinary job-related criticism. It points out that such behavior will not be tolerated in the future. Often, too, an oral warning is documented with a written record.

Discipline Versus Punishment



Discipline is not necessarily the same thing as punishment. Punishment simply means subjecting someone to a penalty. Discipline implies an attempt to correct or reform the unacceptable behavior. Properly used, discipline helps a person take responsibility for his or her own actions.

Stage 2: Written warning. If the oral warning proves insufficient, the next stage is usually to put the warning into a formal document addressed to the employee. At this stage, penalties for the next infraction are specified. A copy of the document goes into the employee's personnel file, and other copies are distributed to the supervisor's boss and to the union representative (if any).



Stage 3: Suspension. If the unacceptable behavior persists after warnings, the next stage is often suspension without pay. The employee is told not to report to work for a certain period of time, and usually his or her wages are stopped. The employee is also warned that, if the behavior in question doesn't improve, the next step is dismissal.

In many cases, suspension is used as a temporary measure while the offense is being investigated. If the employee is cleared of misconduct, he or she is reimbursed for the lost wages.

Stage 4: Dismissal. Occasionally, an employee commits such an outrageous act that dismissal is immediate. Large-scale theft, for instance, or sabotage, or threats of violence to other workers—these could merit an immediate firing.

In large firms, however, most dismissals occur as the culmination of a long series of warnings and other measures. Because government laws and regulations protect workers from unjust disciplinary actions, corporations take great care to comply with the rules. Before a person is fired, many firms require that he or she receive formal counseling in an attempt to solve the problem. Union contracts may also specify the conditions under which an employee can be terminated. The supervisor's own manager almost always becomes involved in the decision.

In smaller organizations, the internal requirements for dismissal may be less stringent. But employee-rights laws and government regulations still apply. A wise supervisor doesn't simply yell, "That's it—you're fired! Get your things and be out of here in five minutes!" Such hasty action is begging for trouble. A complaint of wrongful dismissal can entangle the firm with state and federal agencies and even with the courts.

Tips for Taking Disciplinary Action

The techniques for communication and evaluation that you've learned in this workshop and in Workshop 6 will help you make disciplinary actions as effective and positive as they can be. Here are some additional guidelines to remember:

- ◆ Investigate each disciplinary matter thoroughly. Talk with the employee and with others who witnessed the behavior in question.
- ◆ Make the discipline fit the crime. Harsh penalties for small infractions are counterproductive.
- ◆ Apply rules consistently.
- ◆ Be sure to follow legal requirements as well as company and union rules for due process.
- ◆ Keep complete and careful records.
- ◆ Be forthright about the disciplinary steps being taken and the reasons for them.
- ◆ Don't try to avoid firing an employee by harassing him or her into quitting.



? Did you know?

Some companies, dedicated to making discipline a positive experience, continue to pay employees who are suspended for disciplinary reasons. They want employees to spend the suspension time thinking about their behavior, not resenting their punishment.

ACTIVITY 7.3

NAME _____

Check Your Knowledge

To review what you've learned about employee evaluation and discipline in this workshop, answer the following true-false questions. Select the appropriate letter for each item.

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. The sandwich technique involves surrounding negative comments with more positive statements. | T | F |
| 2. Employees should be discouraged from talking back during their evaluations or disciplinary hearings. | T | F |
| 3. It's the behavior that matters, not the reasons behind it. | T | F |
| 4. For some grave offenses, immediate dismissal can be an option. | T | F |
| 5. Regular evaluations are good for the supervisor as well as the employee. | T | F |
| 6. If you have negative comments to make about an employee's performance, you should save them for the scheduled performance review. | T | F |
| 7. Effective supervisors do not criticize one employee by saying that another is doing better. | T | F |
| 8. Effective supervisors allow employees to propose their own plans for improvement. | T | F |
| 9. Although you should comment on inappropriate behavior or substandard performance, you needn't embarrass the employee by bringing up specific examples. | T | F |
| 10. Suspensions always involve a loss of pay. | T | F |

1. T, 2. F, 3. F, 4. T, 5. T, 6. F, 7. T, 8. T, 9. F, 10. F



GETTING CONNECTED

For a brief background on the management science of performance evaluation, see the balance careers at:

<https://myqss.link/Performance-Evaluation>

The Website of Fair Measures Corporation offers a section on wrongful termination.

<https://myqss.link/Wrongful-Termination>

Finally, by entering terms such as employee review and *performance appraisal* in a search engine, you can find articles, forms, and policy statements from a huge number of organizations, as well as links to companies that sell performance-review products or services. Glancing at some of these sites may help you decide how to manage your own employee evaluations.

WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- Regular employee evaluations are useful for both the employee and the supervisor.
- In evaluating employees, effective supervisors communicate clear performance standards, emphasize strengths as well as weaknesses, and encourage the employee to discuss the comments and create a plan for the future.
- Disciplinary measures typically progress through a series of stages, from oral warnings to dismissal, with each step carefully documented. If handled correctly, discipline can often be a positive activity.