

Judging Worker Performance is Tricky Business

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



Performance based. These are two words we hear over and over again.

They are repeated in the debate over whether layoffs should be based on “seniority” or “performance.” They echo through the demand for businesses to become more efficient in these tough economic times.

“Performance based” simply means that workers are rewarded – with promotions, higher pay and job security – based on their performance, rather than on the time-honored system of seniority. For the most part, this makes a lot of sense. Businesses should be able to retain and reward their most productive employees, especially when economic circumstances require shrinking the workforce.

So, why not embrace “performance-based” systems? After all, isn’t such a practice a responsibility of every good employer? But the fact is that a “performance-based” system places a heavy burden on employers. They must take care that the assessments of every worker’s performance are accurate and fair. And critical to those assessments are regular job performance evaluations.

P.A.S. Associates is a Bakersfield-based human resources consulting firm working with companies of all sizes. Among the questions most frequently received from clients are those concerning performance evaluations.

Employers struggle with the evaluation form itself, the manner in which the evaluations are communicated and with training supervisors how to give workers positive and negative feedback. Through our Employee Hotline, workers also call P.A.S. with questions about how to respond to critical evaluations.

Some of the advice we give to employers and supervisors:

- Develop an evaluation form that is comprehensive, job-related and delivers a clear, consistent message that reflects the company’s goals. The most effective evaluations are those that cover the employee’s commitment to the company’s vision and values, their general behavior in the work environment, and are specific to an employee’s position responsibilities.
- Conduct a regular – at least annual (but better if more often) – performance evaluation with each worker. These should be one-on-one discussions, with an employee bringing their perspective to the conversation, as well.

- Show “professional courage.” The “easy” evaluations are the ones that contain only compliments. If a worker needs to improve, clearly explain deficiencies and what must be done to correct them. Don’t wimp out. It doesn’t help you, or the employee!
- Set goals for the worker to improve performance.
- Ensure the evaluation is accurate and fair. This may require self-evaluation. Weigh observations against potential biases. If necessary, consult with other supervisors or HR, and seek feedback when preparing a critical evaluation.
- Give the worker an opportunity to respond. Listen to the response. While the response may not change the outcome of an evaluation, it may provide insights regarding performance deficiencies and help develop corrective action.
Some of the advice we give to workers who received bad evaluations:
- Stay calm. The first inclination may be to strike back. Generally that’s a bad idea. Does the person who delivered the evaluation have power over your continued employment, assignments, promotion or pay? Do you really need the job? (And who doesn’t in today’s economy?) Then take a deep breath before responding.
- The general expectation is for a defensive, argumentative, or explosive response. Instead, deliver a “surprise.” Be calm. Respond in a “mature” manner.
- Listen and take notes. While you might not agree with the criticism, you need to understand it and your supervisor’s point of view. That understanding will help you change his or her perception of you in the future. Make sure you understand your supervisor’s expectations.
- Ask questions for clarification. But be careful how you ask. For example, don’t ask: How could you make such a ridiculous comment? Instead, ask: What could I have done to have prevented the problem?
- Don’t engage in a pointless debate about every detail. Likely you won’t change your supervisor’s mind. Instead, focus on the future. Ask how you can prevent future problems.
- Ask for a follow-up evaluation. Yes, I know, especially after receiving a critical evaluation, no one wants to climb back into the ring for “round two.” But it’s the only way to determine if your “corrective action” is changing your supervisor’s perception of your work. This also will document actions you take to improve your performance.
- Most companies provide a mechanism to “officially respond” to a critical evaluation. Weigh the impact of your response. Keep it short and constructive.
Fair, accurate and regular performance evaluations benefit both employers and employees. But they require thoughtful preparation and responses from all involved.

This article written by Holly Culhane first appeared online and in The Bakersfield Californian on Friday, March 7, 2011. Holly Culhane is president of the Bakersfield-based human resources consulting firm P.A.S. Associates. She can be contacted through her website www.pasassociates.com and through the [PAS Facebook page](#) or by phone at 631-2165.

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