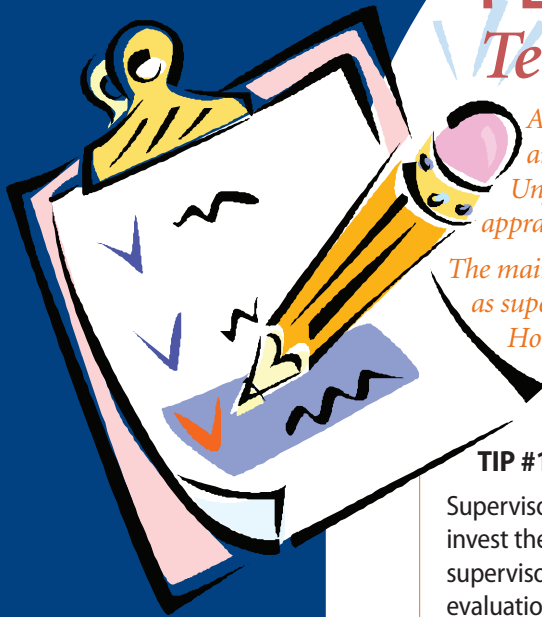


Employment Practices *Update*

Bringing important information to emergency service organizations

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PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS: *Ten Tips for Improving Your System*

A performance evaluation system can be an effective communication tool with employees and volunteers, as they crave and deserve constructive feedback on their job performance. Unfortunately, the majority of those with supervisory authority dread conducting appraisals.

The main knocks against performance evaluations are the time it takes to complete them, as well as supervisors' unwillingness to be brutally honest and possibly confrontational with coworkers. However, your emergency service organization (ESO) can improve its performance management process for the betterment of all members.

TIP #1: ESO Members Must Believe in the Value of Performance Evaluations

Supervisory and non-supervisory personnel alike must believe in the evaluation system in order to invest the time necessary to complete the exercise the "right way". It is particularly easy for those with supervisory authority to go through the motions when completing performance evaluations. Sure, evaluation forms may be filled out, but supervisors may be putting minimum effort into the process.

The leaders of your ESO are encouraged to seek "buy-in" from employees and/or volunteers and solicit feedback from members to improve your ESO's current evaluation form and process as a whole.

Explain through education and training that, when properly supported and managed, performance appraisals can achieve and contribute to:

- Providing accurate performance measurement for the short and long term
- Reinforcing the ESO's mission, values, and priorities
- Empowering employees and volunteers to set personal and institutional goals
- Allowing members to communicate what is needed from the organization to help achieve personal goals
- Identifying an individual's strengths and direction
- Motivating employees by communicating that the ESO cares about their professional goals and development
- Examining team roles and exploring opportunities for team building
- Reviewing and clarifying essential and non-essential job duties
- Delegating and defining additional job responsibilities
- Increasing communication and generally strengthening the relationship between supervisors and subordinates
- Identifying educational and training needs
- Developing supervisory skills

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TIP #2: Provide More Commentary

When reading completed performance evaluations, most often you will find a lack of detailed commentary from supervisors. Substantive and thoughtful written feedback takes time. Brief commentary communicates a message that the supervisor doesn't care enough about the workers to invest much time.

Employees are begging to know *why* their supervisor assigns a particular rating; it is the supervisor's responsibility to provide examples and objective detail.

TIP #3: Train Supervisors

All persons with supervisory authority, regardless of their rank or number of years of experience, should participate in periodic training on evaluations. Training allows for discussions among those with supervisory responsibilities to help build consistency in how evaluations are done and helps demonstrate the organization's commitment to continuously improve the evaluation process and overall communication.

TIP #4: Set Measurable Goals

Employees and their supervisors should work together to set short- and long-term performance goals. They should establish specific and quantifiable objectives and offer necessary support, such as additional training. Often evaluation systems focus more on designating ratings, such as "Above Average/Average/Below Average" in a variety of categories. Job-specific goals are more relevant and measurable.

TIP #5: Recognize that Annual Evaluations Are Not Enough

If supervisors only complete annual reviews, they are forced to recall and comment on a year's worth of experiences. This once-a-year approach isn't ideal because it tends to focus on extraordinary events or revisit past problems that should have been addressed at the time. Instead, employees need regular, ongoing counseling and feedback to help set both short- and long-term goals. These discussions typically focus on incremental performance objectives. Annual evaluations should be a summary of the more frequent counseling and performance development meetings documented throughout the year.

TIP #6: Offer Self-Evaluations

Most ESOs limit the evaluation forms to those completed by the direct supervisor. The individual being evaluated should be given an opportunity to evaluate his or her performance before meeting with the supervisor. This allows for more of an open two-way communication, rather than what may be perceived as a one-sided critique.

An employee may utilize the same evaluation form as the supervisor. The self-review should be an official part of performance management documentation, and should be kept in the individual's permanent personnel file.

TIP #7: Incorporate Job Descriptions

Performance evaluations provide an opportunity to periodically review job or position descriptions. Logically, an employee or volunteer should be evaluated based on the essential and non-essential duties set forth in a job description. Those presently serving in positions should play an active role in ensuring the accuracy of the job descriptions. If work responsibilities change, the job description and evaluation should be altered accordingly. Moreover, position descriptions should accurately detail the mental and physical requirements of the job.

TIP #8: Integrate PIPs

A formal PIP (Performance Improvement Plan) is typically instituted when a member's performance problems are identified. A supervisor initiates the PIP, which helps increase communication, guidance, and accountability. Establishing a PIP allows a performance issue to be addressed at the time of an event, rather than possibly waiting months until the annual performance appraisal.

A supervisor should revisit the status or progress of the PIP during yearly evaluations as part of the overall member development process.

TIP #9: Stop Workplace Wrongdoing

Take the opportunity during the annual performance evaluation to ask the question, "Since your last evaluation, have you witnessed or been personally subjected to any workplace risk or wrongdoing, such as harassment, discrimination, or safety violations?" It is important for any ESO to be able to demonstrate its efforts to prevent, discover, and stop wrongdoing, as well as prevent future occurrences.

TIP #10: Consider 360-Degree Evaluations

Your ESO may consider implementing a 360-degree performance evaluation process. This involves an individual being evaluated by superiors and subordinates, as well as coworkers of the same level or rank. Assessing from a variety of positions or angles gives a 360-degree view of an individual's performance.

A 360-degree tool should be utilized as a performance improvement tool rather than a factor for salary reviews or determining discipline, such as termination. Fellow workers' comments in the 360-degree process should be anonymous. This allows confidentiality for those providing feedback.

Carefully select the person within your ESO to act as the gatekeeper of the information submitted by members. Also, it is important that those designated within the ESO should take the information gathered to develop an action plan.

Conclusion

Maintaining a comprehensive performance management system is not easy, but it is essential for member development and strengthened work relationships. If you take the time, your ESO and its members will reap the rewards.

