

Library Staff Development through Performance Appraisal

The use of performance evaluation is suggested as a means of improving staff motivation and expertise and of providing a higher level of library service. A summary of the types and uses of performance appraisal and the arguments for and against its effectiveness are followed by a proposal for including this tool in a total program of management communication, goal-setting, and evaluation as they can impact on professional development and job satisfaction rather than directly on promotions and salary increases.

IN AN EFFECTIVE academic library the professional staff can be the most valuable resource—more important than any other one component: books, card catalog, documents, etc. A good professional staff is the key to all the rest, providing access to information whether through selection, cataloging, reference, interlibrary loan, or administration of others. Giving the level of service that offers total access to information requires a staff that is well trained, highly motivated, and cooperative; and the encouragement of such a staff has been a continuing goal of administrators.

One method of encouraging higher standards of performance that has been popular for about the last twenty years in business is the use of performance evaluation. A variety of appraisal techniques have been used, ranging from essays to absolute rating scales, forced comparisons, or ranking of employees. (An excellent short summary of standard methods and their applicability was provided by Winston Oberg in 1972.)¹

Performance appraisal is applied for a variety of goals:

1. To improve performance in the present job.
2. To provide a basis for recommending promotion, salary increases, or dismissal.
3. To give the employee a chance to

“know where he or she stands” in the supervisor’s estimation.

4. To develop an inventory of human resources for the use of management—a record of the available talents and potential among the present staff.

5. To provide a method of counseling and encouraging staff members to grow and to plan for future development.

As early as 1957, however, Douglas McGregor pointed out the dangers of using the same technique to try to accomplish such diverse goals.² The evaluation of a subordinate can force the supervisor into “playing God,” judging performance on personality rather than on results, employing subjective standards, demanding that one employee be measured against another in a win-lose situation, and requiring an uncomfortable face-to-face interview in which neither manager nor subordinate is prepared to give or receive criticism.

The problems inherent in traditional appraisal systems are summarized in Marjorie Johnson’s 1972 academic library survey,³ and specific psychological errors to avoid when evaluating an employee are described in the Pennsylvania State University Libraries “Management Guide to Performance Evaluation.”⁴

These errors include the “halo effect” (an overall or early impression of the employee that affects the rating of the individual work factors); the “central tendency” error (rating

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most people toward the middle of any scale); unconscious prejudice or partiality based on race, politics, friendship, etc.; "contrast" error (rating an employee on his or her potential, rather than on actual performance); inappropriate upgrading of all ratings (to compete with what the supervisor thinks that other department heads are doing, to prevent unfavorable reflections on the supervisor's managerial ability, or to avoid any direct confrontation with the employee); as well as many others.

Pizam discussed still another intrinsic error, "social differentiation."⁵ It has been found that some appraisers have difficulty in evaluating subordinates objectively simply because they never recognize wide differentiations in behavior and do not use most of the scale in rating their employees. "It appears therefore that the act of appraisal . . . merely expresses the appraiser's differentiating ability or style of rating behavior. . . . Low differentiators tend to ignore or suppress differences, perceiving the universe as more uniform than it really is."⁶

The credibility of traditional performance evaluation programs was further undermined by studies done at the General Electric Company, which concluded:

Criticism has a negative effect on achievement of goals.

Praise [relating to general performance characteristics] has little effect one way or another.

Performance improves most when specific goals are established.

Defensiveness resulting from critical appraisal produces inferior performance.

Coaching should be a day-to-day, not a once-a-year, activity.

Mutual goal setting, not criticism, improves performance.

Interviews designed primarily to improve a man's [sic] performance should not at the same time weigh his salary or promotion in the balance.

Participation by the employee in the goal-setting procedure helps produce favorable results.⁷

As one of the few carefully documented, methodologically acceptable management studies on the effect of criticism and mutual goal setting, the study has provided the rationale for many recent performance appraisal programs—including the one proposed in this paper. The conclusions

reached at General Electric support current psychological findings about the use of behavior modification to encourage and reinforce positive behavior while extinguishing negative behavior by, to put it simply, ignoring it.

MANAGEMENT-BY-OBJECTIVES (MBO)

An important part of the General Electric study was to confirm what Peter Drucker had presented and McGregor had recommended years earlier: the use of management-by-objectives (MBO) as the basis for professional performance evaluation.^{8,9} This system involves the supervisor and employee in the establishment of priorities and goals, with specific objectives to be accomplished (by a certain date) to further these goals. The evaluative process then becomes an analysis with an emphasis on the future and on the strengths and potential of the employee. It should blunt some of the judgmental aspects of appraisal and promote a better relationship between superior and subordinate.

An article by Thompson and Dalton provides a good defense of the management-by-objectives approach because it is future-oriented rather than focusing on mistakes of the past. It is an open system in which employees are compared with their own objectives rather than on a scale where some must be ranked lower than others, and it is a flexible system that can be tailored to promote the strengths of each individual.¹⁰

The pendulum has now swung away from the old judgmental ranking scales with their emphasis on "traits" (aspects of personality, which are supposed to have a bearing on job performance, such as "dependability," "initiative," etc.) toward management-by-objectives and/or a discussion of observable behavior only (number of books cataloged, reference questions answered). Sometimes this is supported by the use of techniques such as "critical incidents," where the supervisor records actual occurrences that exemplify positive or negative behavior.

We are beginning to recognize the use of performance appraisal as a tool that can be appropriate for counseling, career planning, and staff development. A summary of recent research into the use of performance appraisal, with suggestions for affecting

motivation, is found in Belcher's excellent text *Compensation Administration*.^{11,12}

PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT

In 1971 Ernest deProspero¹³ applied Kindall and Gatza's five-step program¹⁴ to libraries in an effort to focus on employee growth through appraisal. This program includes discussions by the individual and the supervisor on job content, setting of performance targets by the employee, review of these with the supervisor, establishment of evaluative checkpoints, and appraisal of results at the end of the time period.

At about the same time Harry Levinson sounded a warning against unqualified use of MBO. Levinson called MBO "one of the greatest management illusions" and recommended that an MBO program include consideration of an individual's motivation and personal goals, avoidance of the static job description, which is so often a basis for the objectives, and the recognition that the way in which an individual goes about achieving these goals can be as important as the goals themselves.^{15,16} He makes a point that is particularly applicable to libraries, since supportive working relationships can do so much to improve service and increase motivation.

Every organization is a social system, a network of interpersonal relationships. A man may do an excellent job by objective standards of measurement, but may fail miserably as a partner, subordinate, superior or colleague.¹⁷

In the library these interpersonal relationships can be even more important because so many areas of professional librarianship cannot be appropriately measured by objective standards. How does one cope with the colleague in the selection department who refuses to buy interdisciplinary material out of his or her departmental book budget, thus keeping carefully within set financial limits and building a narrow, specialized collection in depth, but ignoring new fields of interest to the students and cross-disciplinary faculty? A straight MBO approach to evaluation is unlikely to reveal or discourage this inadequacy.

Current practice in academic libraries, according to Yarbrough's *ARL Management*

Supplement,¹⁸ includes much use of mutual goal setting and evaluation by librarian and supervisor (and often library director), along with or as a substitute for other procedures such as traditional appraisals (in checklist or essay form), peer evaluations (mainly to recommend for or against promotion, tenure, or salary increases), and even appraisal of supervisors by their subordinates.

One of the most innovative and detailed approaches to performance evaluation was developed at McGill University Libraries in cooperation with the ARL Office of University Library Management Studies in 1975.¹⁹ The key to its uniqueness is the focus on supervisory training in motivation, evaluation, and counseling that appear to be essential in developing such a program. It then recommends the setting of unit and individual work goals, followed by semiannual performance reviews. Salary decisions are treated as a separate procedure, although a formal, annual evaluation does go into the employee's file.

The bases for the McGill program are excellent, but there seems to be a heavy emphasis upon improving the *library's* performance with too little regard for the individual's motivation and for the General Electric findings that "criticism has a negative effect on achievement of goals" and that *general* praise (which is treated almost as an aside in the McGill program) has little effect either way. While the McGill program does recognize that an individual's performance may be helped or hindered by that of some other unit, it does not deal with a solution to this dependency or with the idea of teamwork.

THE "CRITICAL INCIDENT" TECHNIQUE

Current performance appraisal, as exemplified by MBO, by statements of accomplishments on typical faculty (library) evaluation forms, and by the McGill program, focuses not on behavior but on the results of behavior. This stems from the aversion to judging personality when one should be measuring performance. It is certainly true that goals can be legitimately attained by many means, but there is a danger in considering only quantifiable or objective achievements in a service-oriented field like librarianship.

In other words, the way in which one reaches specified objectives is as important as actually reaching them. However, the process of identifying appropriate behavior in specific instances is a difficult, time-consuming one—but one that can lead to genuine staff growth and to the development of future managers and/or specialists. One useful technique in describing specific behavior (such as how to handle the reference interview) is the “critical incident” process.

Let us suppose that the head librarian of the reference department has two librarians who need to be developed into reference specialists. In observing the behavior of the first librarian, the department head might note that individual failed to probe sufficiently when a student inquired about articles on air pollution. The librarian pointed out *Public Affairs Information Service*; the student wandered away, and the librarian returned to a project of selecting books from *Choice*.

The second librarian received a query on behavior modification and, not stopping to find out that the student was a freshman with a two-page summary to prepare, totally overwhelmed the student with a half-hour explanation on the use of *Psychological Abstracts*, on-line access to the ERIC data base, and a tremendous amount of material in the card catalog. During the process, however, the librarian forgot to explain to the freshman how to get from a bibliographic journal citation to the actual printed article.

Now these descriptions are exaggerated, but they illustrate that the “critical incident” records actual, specific behaviors, which can then form the basis for a future learning discussion. It is also quite important that positive incidents be recorded so that the employee can recognize and receive reinforcement for appropriate behaviors.

PERFORMANCE PROFILES

Critical incidents can also form the basis for a general list of important behavior aspects in each department or in general interaction in the library. In order to analyze how something was accomplished or the quality of performance, it is necessary to

identify the important behaviors expected of employees and how those can be recognized in specific situations, for example, in open meetings, in patron contact, in telephone answering, etc. The actual process of identifying these is most helpful if everyone participates.

In another example from business of the use of critical incidents, the Corning Glass Company developed a fascinating “performance profile” that isolated behaviors which managers could specifically identify, recognize, and discuss with subordinates to give them concrete ideas on how to improve performance and strengthen managerial abilities.²⁰ A sample of the behaviors that were isolated by identifying approximately 300 critical incidents and translating these into 150 general behavioral descriptions included:

- a. Objects to ideas before they are explained.
- b. Takes the initiative in group meetings.
- c. Has difficulty in meeting project deadlines.
- d. Sees his problems in light of the problems of others (that is, does not limit his thinking to his own position or organizational unit.)²¹

Appropriate behavioral descriptions for each individual, depending on his or her position and goals, can be selected from such a general list, to be used as a personal performance profile to reflect strengths, weaknesses, and planned areas of improvement.

DEVELOPING MANAGERIAL ABILITIES

At the beginning of this paper I said that the professional staff of an academic library can be its most important resource. I now suggest that positive, constructive performance appraisal can contribute to the development of that resource both for the good of the library and for the personal and professional growth of the individual librarian; and that in the long run these goals are more relevant to the library than concern about using evaluation for salary and promotion purposes per se.

A typical university library has a percentage of librarians who, having served for a few years, have tenure in fact if not in theory. Operating at a level of membership motivation (wishing to continue to belong to the organization) but not sufficiently motivated to perform,²² they often develop

attitudes that tend to encourage mediocrity, until they are working at a decreased level of output, service, morale, and personal satisfaction.²³ This atmosphere can discourage new employees and cause the loss of valuable talent to the library.

A staff development program has the potential to expand both specific service skills and general managerial abilities. By managerial abilities I am not necessarily referring only to the ability to supervise but to organizational and leadership qualities, generally accepted as desirable managerial traits in any organizational setting. Charles Gibbons called them the "marks of a mature manager"²⁴ and stated that the individual should:

1. Possess well-defined goals.
2. Be able to allocate resources according to priorities.
3. Be able to make decisions, act upon them, and accept responsibility for them.
4. Be willing to compromise.
5. Be able to delegate and to depend on subordinates.
6. Be self-motivated and self-controlled.
7. Be able to organize, plan, and communicate for effective use of resources.
8. Maintain good relationships with others.
9. Possess emotional maturity and the internal resources to cope with frustration, disappointment, and stress.
10. Be able to appraise oneself and one's performance objectively, to admit to being wrong.
11. Expect that one will keep on growing, improve one's performance, and continue to develop.

I would add to this list two qualities that Harlan Cleveland stresses in his excellent book *The Future Executive*.²⁶ These are a tolerance for ambiguity and an openness to change. A performance appraisal program that is aimed at professional growth should contribute to the development of these characteristics in the professional staff.²⁷

THE LIBRARY AS AN INTERACTIVE SYSTEM

If libraries are to participate actively in technological developments and cope positively with the information explosion while faced with the pressures of decreasing staff

and collection funds, then the best talents of that staff must be recognized, cultivated, and used. An emphasis on teamwork rather than competition, an acknowledgment that each department is part of a cooperative system, is essential.

Discussions and negotiations for participation in national and regional library networks and academic consortia have become commonplace; yet in my experience, true day-to-day cooperation among departments within one organization is less usual.

The need for accountability and performance measures is recognized when dealing with large library projects, and these serve as motivating factors for the project directors. In a similar way, performance appraisal can be used as feedback within a library to keep the system functioning on the highest level and as one organization rather than as fragmented pieces with conflicting goals.

In the establishment of a performance appraisal program for an individual library, the organization and its employees can be considered as an interactive system involved with mutual goals for the library, the department, the unit, and the librarian, including for each a feedback loop where goal setting is one input, performance is an output, and evaluation is used to correct the system and keep it on course. The action of departments and users upon each other should be kept in mind at every stage of the program.

For example, the interdependence of the acquisitions, collection development, and catalog departments in providing access to a book is usually recognized and talked about—like the weather—but little is done to contribute to meaningful cooperation. Goals can be set for such things as the quantity of orders placed in a given time, the length of time for receipt of the book, and optimum use of bibliographic searchers in handling the book before and during cataloging. But much of this is based on the quantity and cyclical flow of orders from the selection librarians into the acquisitions department or the percentage of receipts through standing orders and approval programs, which the cataloging department can then handle. The development of such quantitative goals, therefore, might best be done jointly with an open acknowledgment

of the interdependence of these departments rather than with a fruitless competition between them.

A PROGRAM PROPOSAL

Let us consider the use of performance evaluation in an interactive system that includes supervisory training, mutual goal setting, peer discussions, and teamwork, with an emphasis on behavior as well as results, as a means of developing future leaders and promoting better library service while providing satisfaction for the individual.

The program outlined below is an attempt to use performance appraisal as a library management development tool. It can be modified to meet individual needs and library situations, and whether it should be implemented formally or informally depends to a great extent on the resources of manpower and time available. It does require the support of the library administration, but the procedures themselves could easily be guided by members of a professional development committee if there is no specific personnel librarian at the institution. In any case, its focus should remain the same: communication training for supervisors, goal setting as part of an interactive system, positive motivation, and the highest utilization of and response to individual needs, skills, and strengths.

Step 1: Training of Library Supervisors

The goal setting and analysis, both individually and collectively, that this program requires will call for supervisors to act as facilitators, to listen carefully and accurately, to spot nonverbal messages, to keep a discussion on track, and to avert the game-playing that often develops out of self-defense when one's ego is threatened. To prepare them for this, the first step is a workshop for supervisors. This ought best be led by an outside consultant or an internal specialist in communication skills (perhaps from the psychology, public administration, or business department in a college or university) to cover active listening, group discussion leadership, how to reach a consensus, how to motivate positively, etc. An interesting approach might be to make use of *The OK Boss* by Muriel James²⁷ as

background reading to introduce the concept of transactional analysis and then to use this tool as a basis for the communication skills to be developed in the workshop.

Step 2: Goal Setting

This involves group meetings for all staff units of the library, to discuss the purposes and responsibilities of the library, the department, and the individual. These discussions ought to begin at the level of the library director and associate directors meeting with their department heads. It is easy enough to say that a library provides information, but what are its priorities?

In a specific academic setting, who comes first—faculty, students (graduate, undergraduate, transfer), community, alumni, university staff, library staff, who? Each has different needs, and the priorities that are established will ultimately have an impact on the type and scope of reference service, the emphasis in book selection, the key hours for staffing public desks or keeping the library open, etc.

What are the priorities in terms of time versus money, expenditures for staff salaries versus books, for automated systems, for cooperative projects? (If any part of the staff is unionized, the union will have to be brought into the discussions at some point too.)

This kind of discussion and planning is so often lost in the day-to-day, crisis management that harried administrators are forced into. I realize that the examples above are issues for which there is no one right answer, but some consideration and thought given to these priorities at the beginning of the project is the best basis for rational and consistent goal setting in each department down the line.

As supervisors next participate in sessions of goal setting for their departments, it will be quickly recognized by the group that each department member has certain strengths that can be most effectively used in particular projects. This does not deny the need for job descriptions and the use of these in setting objectives (as has been generally recommended). However, job descriptions are static and based on past experience and needs. Goal setting, which looks toward the future, optimal utilization

of available resources, and an open feeling of cooperation among peers to achieve similar objectives can result in a whole new use of skills.

A traditional reference department, which assigns each librarian to three hours of desk duty a day, might find that the optimal use of manpower would call for a division on the basis of subject expertise (depending on the question asked), with a student assistant to respond to those general queries that are routine (Where's the drinking fountain? What are the hours of the reserve reading room? Where's the latest issue of *Readers' Guide*?) At the same time the reference librarians may realize that their work of interpreting the card catalog to users might be enhanced by a short orientation or refresher course run by the catalog department for the rest of the staff. They might wish to be brought up to date on such questions as, What's the best way to locate government documents? How are branch library holdings handled in the main catalog?

These thoughts lead us directly into step 3.

Step 3: System Interaction

As each department has a chance to discuss its responsibilities, priorities, and goals internally, the staff members will recognize their interdependence with other departments. The supervisor can keep track of these relationships and the particular points of congruency, to be used as a basis for discussions between departments. The usual procedure, when conflicts of interest arise, has been for the two department heads to meet privately and try to work it out. More often than not, however, a win-lose situation develops in which neither can compromise without losing face. A general meeting between the acquisitions and the catalog departments to discuss bibliographic searching, with the head of technical services as facilitator, can do much to clear the air, promote cooperation, and develop a workable compromise—or at least foster an understanding of the other point of view.

Step 4: Refresher

At this point, if not before, it is time for a one-day refresher workshop for the supervisors. They will have participated in goal-setting discussions with their own superiors,

with their own departments, and with related departments (all group sessions) and will now have all kinds of situations to discuss: where their group got off the track, when the expected consensus was not reached, where face-saving or game-playing took the place of constructive negotiations. Role-playing and further guidance in transactional analysis and facilitation are appropriate here.

Step 5: Individual Goal Setting

Each librarian should now be prepared to list his or her goals—professional, departmental, and personal career or life goals—relating them to the operation of the department and the library, building on strengths in order to best utilize one's talents. Each goal should be accompanied by specific, recognizable means to attain this. For instance, the librarian whose goal is to head the acquisitions department might plan to prepare for this responsibility by:

1. Gaining knowledge of publishers and vendors through regular reading of *Publishers Weekly*, scanning catalogs, and visiting exhibitors' displays at conventions;
2. Attending acquisitions discussion groups and applicable committee meetings at professional conferences;
3. Taking a continuing education course in out-of-print acquisitions;
4. Assisting with budget and book fund allocations (with the support of the present department head).

The supervisor will then take this list of goals and the specific means to achieve them and discuss these with the staff member, offering guidance, suggestions, and support. The more positive the response that can be given, the better. At the same time, however, the manager has an obligation to see that the goals and tactics are realistic—within the librarian's abilities but requiring a consistent effort.

Specific target dates must be set wherever possible, and if the goal or project is a long-term one, then benchmarks should be established to measure interim achievement. If the librarian's goal is to become a specialist in rare books, this may require courses, conferences, contacts, reading, an internship or exchange, etc. To begin with, a tentative curriculum can be listed, the

most relevant conferences targeted, a special collections bibliography prepared in an area that will benefit the library users. Out of this may come an application for a grant, travel funds, or professional leave time, and a structured program to achieve this expertise.

The supervisor must also be realistic with the employee, even encouraging him or her to seek other opportunities if the librarian's goals are not compatible with the library situation at all, or when the librarian is really ready for additional responsibilities but no openings are expected to exist for some time. In all areas, once agreement is reached, the supervisor has an obligation to assist in the achievement of the goals.

By listing individual goals and strategies and then discussing these with the supervisor, the librarian will also begin formulating a performance profile that shows strengths and developmental needs.²⁸ These are relative to the individual, not on a scale that compares one person with another. As this profile is developed, it can form the basis for future appraisals and then future goals. Figure 1 gives an example of the form that might be used for this purpose.

Step 6: Critical Incidents

Another component in building a performance profile is the use of critical incidents, as described earlier. This technique should be used informally to record observable, applicable occurrences, rather than depend-

ing upon memory, judgment, and impressions. Emphasis should be placed on specific, positive contributions made by the employee and on noting occasions when the librarian does demonstrate improvement in an area of the performance profile as this is developed. The critical incidents will form the basis of private discussions between the supervisor and the librarian, both to specifically praise good performance and to determine individual strengths and weaknesses that both parties recognize are pertinent to goal achievement.

For the library with sufficient time or interest, an extrapolation of performance needs from critical incidents can form the basis for preparing general performance profile characteristics against which each staff member may wish to measure himself or herself.²⁹

Step 7: Review and Analysis

An essential part of performance evaluation is to establish feedback loops through frequent, supportive, scheduled, and unscheduled work review and analysis sessions, again building on strengths and future potential rather than on past performance failures. The first informal checkpoint should be in three months, with a midyear goal reevaluation after six months. This is the time to redefine goals that no longer seem realistic or where financial or technological developments in the library require new responsibilities or new directions.

	Strength	Weakness	Improving
ability to set priorities			
organizational perspective			
ability to complete a project			
decisiveness			
accuracy			
willingness to delegate			
ability to follow up			
Name _____ Date Set _____ Interim Follow-Up _____ Review Date _____			

Fig. 1
Performance Appraisal Form

At each step—the first unit meetings, the interdepartmental discussions, the individual goal setting and reviews—it is up to the supervisor to keep the conversations focused on the relevant topics (without stifling productive discussions), to come to decisions, and to record progress.

Preliminary preparation by all parties will contribute to productive meetings, but it is easy for busy staff members to forget to prepare lists or goals before the meeting is scheduled to start. To avoid this, it is helpful to allow fifteen minutes at the start of the unit meetings particularly for each person to consider the subject of the meeting and his or her views on it and to make a list of goals and priorities for discussion with the group.

Step 9: Evaluation of the Evaluation

Since this is an experimental program, which should be designed and adapted to respond to staff and service needs, an evaluation of its effectiveness is necessary. This can be done in two parts:

1. An attitude questionnaire for staff, management, and client groups (faculty and students, library users and nonusers). The same questionnaire should be administered before the program begins, after one year of activity, and after two.

2. An examination of actual goals achieved after two years—on each level and through interaction and cooperation among the parts of the library system. All examples of cooperation, improvement of service, or

professional development that were not originally specified goals should be noted as well, with an attempt to discover whether these arose in part or in whole out of the performance evaluation program.

CONCLUSION

The entire process of defining responsibilities, establishing goals and the means to achieve them, developing performance profiles, and then evaluating achievement should all follow a regular cycle. The process should begin again annually with goal setting by the library administration, and a refresher course in communication for the supervisors or the entire staff would also not be amiss.

The proposed program is, indeed, a time-consuming one. The underlying principles of MBO and participatory management, however, have been applied in academic libraries around the country through the Management Review and Analysis Program³⁰ and its more recent small-library counterpart, the Academic Library Development Program.³¹ In contrast, this proposal presents an opportunity to improve communication, performance, and morale through a limited area of library management, which can, however, have broad-reaching effects. With support from the library administration (mandatory for the success of any of these projects), the old concept of performance evaluation will make a positive impact on librarians and library service.

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