

Performance Appraisal of Librarians—A Survey

PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL TOUCHES ON one of the most emotionally charged activities in business life—the assessment of a person's contribution and ability. This is true whether the business is that of running a university library or operating a commercial organization.

In the spring of 1971, a study was undertaken by the author to compile information on performance appraisals of librarians in college and university libraries. The objectives of the study were to:

- (1) determine approaches used in appraising librarians, together with the apparent success, or lack of success, of these approaches;
- (2) compare the results with performance appraisal concepts expressed in recent literature;
- (3) draw conclusions which could be helpful to those responsible for appraisal of professional personnel in libraries.

All university libraries in the United States and Canada having more than fifteen librarians on the staff were surveyed. Out of this total of 185 libraries, responses were received from 138. The majority, almost 95 percent, indicated that some form of appraisal was used. The methods ranged from a casual observation of staff members by the director with no written record made, to lengthy interviews with staff members

discussing their performance based on the results of a form. The frequency of appraisal varied from several times during the first year, to annually until tenure was achieved. The type of form used showed the most divergence: of the seventy-four sample forms received, only one form was duplicated. The forms ranged from mediocre to excellent in each of the three categories into which they were separated—rating-sheet types, forms identical to those used to evaluate teaching faculty performance, and forms designed to evaluate the special competencies of librarians. There were samples of thirty-five rating-sheet types, seventeen of the kind used to evaluate teaching faculty performance, and twenty-two forms especially designed to evaluate librarians. Not all libraries stating that they conducted appraisals and used a form included one with their questionnaire, and some libraries used two or three forms of various types.

A consensus of experts in the field suggests that no organization has a choice of whether it should appraise its personnel and their performance. Every time a promotion is made or a salary increase is given, an appraisal of some kind takes place. The question is not then whether there should be an appraisal, but rather it is a question of method.

The fact that performance appraisal is increasingly used is borne out in the literature by many writers. Thompson and Dalton point out that the signals a person receives about the assessment his

Ms. Johnson is cataloger at the Memphis Public Library and Information Center, Memphis, Tennessee.

supervisor is making about his contribution and ability has a strong impact on his self-esteem and on his subsequent performance.¹ Sloan and Johnson stress that the scope of performance appraisal is growing.² Its traditional focus has been enlarged to include not only the individual's on-the-job behavior but also his functioning as an integral part of the organizational system. Applying the systems approach to personnel appraisal, the individual stands as an integral part of a unit or department and his performance should also be evaluated by the degree to which he accomplishes specific results that contribute to departmental and organizational achievement.³ Performance is evaluated by the degree to which a person achieves explicit objectives in terms of measurable performance or results.

Kellogg points out that the appraisal system has also become a basis for counseling and coaching subordinates, if used properly.⁴ Wallace lists the three functions of performance appraisal as an individual growth tool, to distribute rewards among a group, and to file as a personnel reference history.⁵ He concludes that these are distinct, different needs, and no one appraisal system designed for one need should be used for another.

Performance appraisal in libraries has, in the past, been closely tied to periodic library planning activities; it has been used primarily as a written justification for salary action. The personnel director of a large university library in Pennsylvania stated that, in the past, librarians were immune from appraisals of any kind; however, with severe budget cutbacks, she felt that some kind of appraisal system would have to be initiated. Others who were using rating scale appraisals, indicated that they were trying a new technique. The new method was often a form similar to that used to evaluate teaching faculty, particularly if the librarians had just recently

achieved faculty status. Other library directors, possibly more comfortable about the security of their librarians' status, were designing forms which specifically measured the competencies of librarians, or were experimenting with management-by-objectives, or mutual goal-setting techniques. Of the respondents indicating that they used appraisals, 43 stated that they were considering changing their present technique; an additional 22 respondents indicated that their appraisal method was either in its first or second year of use.

FREQUENCY OF APPRAISAL

The majority of those libraries surveyed which conduct appraisals performed these evaluations periodically, 80 percent on an annual basis. Continuous evaluation of performance is an essential part of supervision states Harold Mayfield, and many others advocate a relationship between supervisor and subordinate where performance is discussed as a part of day-to-day operations.⁶ Black suggests that the appraisal interview is primarily a teaching device.⁷ The objective is to help the employee help himself by persuading him to recognize and correct his deficiencies. The follow-up of the appraisal interview is the training program. Talking to a subordinate about how he does his job is a vital part of his training, and successful managers recognized for their talent to develop people use every opportunity to give their employees individual coaching. This includes regular critiques of their performance, not just a once-a-year, get-it-over-with-for-another-year approach. Daily, on-the-job contact with subordinates is a natural time to point out the specifics of job performance. Praise or criticism in such circumstances does not take on exaggerated importance. The employee more clearly understands the deficiency when it is pointed out to him immediately than if it is discussed six months later in a formal

interview. If he has done something well and receives instant recognition, he is far more pleased than if his merits are recited at the annual review.

Practitioners as well as theorists seem to agree that the greatest disadvantage of the single periodic appraisal is in expecting it to accomplish too many objectives.⁸ The salary action issue so dominates the annual comprehensive performance appraisal interview that neither party is in the right frame of mind to discuss plans for improved performance. Some supervisors indicate that set, periodic appraisals tend to cause them to save up material in order to have enough to discuss.

Although the majority of libraries surveyed conducted appraisals on an annual basis, several specified modifications, such as more frequent appraisals where past deficiencies were recorded or elimination of appraisals after tenure was achieved. The inference underlying this response seemed to be that some directors felt that appraisals were to be avoided. The confident reply of one director fairly well sums up this attitude: "It has been our experience that, by judicious selection of applicants and by careful screening during the probationary period, we have a staff of such quality that appraisals are not needed for those who attain tenure." It is easy to find administrators who feel that they know their people so well that appraisals are unnecessary; however, it is much more difficult to find staff members who would not welcome a chance for a better understanding of the over-all goals of the library and a reassessment of the contributions they are making. The attitude of some administrators seems to be that appraisals are intended only to point out shortcomings and that when you have a tenured staff, appraisals are no longer necessary. This interpretation completely eliminates the functions of counseling, praise for jobs well done, a measure of how to distribute rewards,

an individual growth tool, or an opportunity to talk with individual staff members to compare their self-goals with the over-all objectives of the library.

For the majority of libraries conducting appraisals annually, fall, winter, and spring were specified with equal frequency. Significantly, the appraisal time was almost always selected to tie in with the annual salary review, budget preparation, or determination of retention, tenure, or rank for the coming year. Thompson and Dalton, as noted earlier, strongly advocate resisting the temptation to devise one grand performance appraisal system to serve all management needs. Culbreth points out that the appropriate time for evaluating an employee—in terms of his individual development—rarely, if ever, coincides with a rigid timetable; he recommends holding an appraisal whenever one is needed to maintain a good relationship between the supervisor and subordinate or to advance employee development.⁹

USE OF FORMS FOR APPRAISALS

Of those university libraries which do have appraisals, 78 out of 130 used some kind of form or set of guidelines to perform the appraisal. Those not using forms stated that they held informal discussions, or prepared written summary reviews (with no apparent criteria followed).

The use of a well-designed appraisal form is no guarantee of an effective appraisal method. An administrator who possesses the proper skills could conduct satisfactory appraisals with or without a form. The information gathered suggests, however, that the use of a written guide assured a greater degree of success, even in the hands of unskilled evaluators, than would an evaluation system with no guidelines.

PROS AND CONS OF VARIOUS APPRAISAL TECHNIQUES

Cangemi suggests that when using a form based on a rating scale, the evalu-

ator should be careful to avoid four common errors: personal bias, central tendency, halo effect, and logical error. Personal bias errors result when an evaluator rates all individuals consistently too high or too low. The error of central tendency signifies that the evaluator seldom ever gives ratings at the extremes of the scale. The halo effect is usually found in those operating under the presence of strong personal biases. In this situation, the rater judges a person to be the same or nearly the same in all characteristics. Logical error results from a misunderstanding of the characteristic to be measured, and happens more often when no definitions of the characteristics are given.¹⁰

Another reason for dissatisfaction with forms is the difficulty of fitting an individual's performance into pet phrases such as "Knowledge of Bibliographic Resources—Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor (check one)." A measure such as this may be irrelevant to the work performed, yet an evaluation must be given; therefore, a decision is made on probable performance.¹¹ Once the evaluation of that characteristic has been transformed into a rating such as "Good," it is considered equal to other ratings with more reliable bases of measurement. Even the phrase "Quantity of Work" can be difficult to evaluate fairly. Books cataloged can be counted, but there is extreme variation in effort required. Certain kinds of reference work defy quantification, yet many reference librarians are regularly evaluated on the quantity of work produced.

A frequently stated advantage of the checklist is that it promotes consistency between managers; but different interpretations of the levels of rating, and different opinions of what proportions of the employees should be given above-average ratings often negates this apparent advantage.

In some of the traditional methods of appraisal, the subordinate sometimes

reacts adversely to criticism. To accept criticism—even if it is deserved—from a comparative stranger is a bitter pill. One can imagine the rated person thinking "Let he who is without fault cast the first criticism." In order to avoid the role of "judge," other more objective techniques have been designed. One is the management-by-objectives approach popularized by Peter Drucker.¹² This method centers on the assessment of performance by contrasting it with goals set mutually by the supervisor and the subordinate. The individual participates in the goal setting, makes a commitment, and then evaluates his own achievements. McGregor suggests that this type of management encourages the professional to bring his talent, training, and creativity to his job. If a manager uses this approach, he listens, advises, guides, and encourages the subordinate to develop his own potential.¹³

One important advantage of the self-evaluation or participatory approach is that it can often provide the supervisor with useful insights to the person being appraised. Macoy advocates appraisal interviews as an opportunity to take significant steps forward in understanding subordinates, and also as an opportunity for meaningful self-examination by the employee.¹⁴ Employee development is, in the last analysis, self-development.

With rating scales, there is an implied requirement that all qualities must be evaluated. In many cases, this forces judgments on characteristics which have no relationship to job performance. The most frequently used qualities on rating scales are: initiative, leadership, quantity of work, dependability, attitude toward others, cooperativeness, accuracy, judgment, loyalty, organization of work, and quality of work. Several of these traits might be easy to measure and evaluate in a cataloger but impossible to consider fairly in a reference librarian. The quality of leadership could be assessed in a person with super-

visory responsibilities but not in a person who had never had an opportunity to lead others.

The various grades, or levels, of each item on the rating sheet present another opportunity for inconsistency. If five levels are allowed, such as 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, with 5 being the top of the scale, how meaningful is it to give someone a 4 in accuracy? How many errors would one need to make in order to be rated at a 4 instead of a 5? Unless ridiculously specific guidelines are set up, the entire process becomes little more than an exercise. The raters themselves differ in the way they evaluate people. A very conservative person may rarely give a 5 to anyone, while another supervisor may rate everyone at the top. About the only real value of the rating scale kind of appraisal is that it is done periodically and provides an opportunity to think about an employee's progress and discuss with him more than merely why he was given a 3 in loyalty this time.

One strange requirement on many appraisal forms is that of the employee's signature. As Maier points out, this requirement is inconsistent with the goals of an appraisal except where a warning is given.¹⁵ In this case, the purpose of the signature is to preclude the employee saying at a later time that he was never told his work was unsatisfactory. It is somewhat incongruous to come to the close of an otherwise pleasant evaluation interview and be reminded, "Now we must have your signature on the form." One other possible explanation for the signature requirement is that it proves to the administration that the supervisor actually held an evaluation interview with the employee.

Culbreth states that there is no better way to ensure a department's maximum efficiency than to give its personnel proper, continuing evaluation.¹⁶ With this thought comes the question of personnel vs. organization appraisal. It has been suggested that a person is respon-

sible for and can control only certain aspects of his performance.¹⁷ Perhaps we should be evaluating performance problems rather than people. Does a supervisor, as he appraises each employee, ask himself the question, "Did I, as the supervisor, in any way contribute to a performance problem of the subordinate?" Haynes suggests that an employee's effectiveness depends on four things: the employee, the job, the supervisor, and the work environment.¹⁸ Therefore, a performance discussion aimed at increased effectiveness should not be limited to just the employee.

LIBRARIAN APPRAISAL IN THE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

"How many professionals in the library have academic rank? Is your appraisal method for librarians the same as for teaching faculty?"

An analysis of the questionnaires showed that many librarians possess a status somewhat equivalent to faculty, whether or not they had academic rank. An analysis of those responses in which an appraisal form of some kind was used showed that 38 out of 78 used a form identical to that used for teaching faculty, or one similar which had been designed to evaluate the special competencies of librarians. Performance rating, or rating scale forms, were used in 35 libraries. A few libraries relied mainly on summary-type or self-evaluations. Several used more than one technique.

Eldred Smith has discussed the merits of, and prospects for, academic status for librarians.¹⁹ Most librarians desire academic status but a conflict can occur when the librarian is rated on the regular faculty appraisal form in which the criteria are related more to teaching or research faculty activities. A librarian who catalogs eight hours a day may suffer when measured against such criteria. The logical conclusion is that the appraisal must be for performance in a specific position, while still allowing

credit for scholarly achievement beyond the call of duty. The differences and similarities of faculty and librarian responsibilities must be considered specifically for each person and position.

WHO APPRAISES?

In almost all cases where appraisals were conducted, the person responsible for the appraisal gathered opinions from others or reviewed the results with others. If the immediate supervisor was not responsible for the appraisal he was usually consulted. The findings are summarized as follows:

	<i>percent</i>
The director or administrator either prepares or participates in preparing the appraisal	74
One or more committees, councils, or peer groups are involved in the appraisal process	29
Personnel officer is involved in the process	6
Only the director is involved in the appraisal	4
Only the immediate supervisor is involved	6
Only a committee, council, or peer group is involved	3

Some libraries used more than one method, resulting in a total of more than 100.

When appraisal is performed by someone other than the immediate supervisor, and the results are not disclosed to the employee, the main advantages of the process are lost. It is essential for people to know if their work is satisfactory and if not, how and why it fails to meet the mark. Even an outstanding employee should be informed of specific instances both of superior performance and of areas where he might improve.

Grandy cites an example of an outstanding employee completing her first year in an organization. At her appraisal interview her supervisor mentioned

no particular areas of excellence but merely told her how pleased he was with her work. Following the evaluation, her work became quite erratic. Unless the supervisor is able to point out exactly what the employee is doing well, the employee will devise his own tests to discover which behavior pattern will gain approval and which will not.²⁰

Although only a few university libraries in this survey assigned primary responsibility for appraisal to a peer group or committee, many respondents indicated participation by such a group. The apparent objective in the use of a peer group is to attempt to increase the reliability of the appraisal by drawing upon several opinions. French states that when the ratings are made by a group or committee, actual knowledge of the person's performance by each member is vital. Without objective data, a committee may be simply pooling their collective ignorance.²¹ In a large library, all members of a committee usually do not have firsthand knowledge of everyone's work. French further indicates that a major problem in the use of peer, or subordinate, ratings is the potential danger that the ratings may be unintentionally made on criteria which are useful to the rater but not necessarily to the enterprise. For example, a reference librarian participating in the peer group might give excessive weight to incidents involving reference room activities. French concludes, however, that ratings by peers do show promise of being useful in promotional decisions. Hollander found peer ratings to be high in reliability in a study of officer candidates where leadership potential was an important factor.²²

TYPICAL RATINGS

"On the basis of your experience, what percentage of your personnel get ratings that are in the following categories—Above Average, Average, Below Average?"

The majority of respondents indicated that they gave above-average ratings to 70 percent of their staff. Two gave this rating to 95 percent of their staff. Below-average ratings were given to only about 5 percent of the personnel.

The report of the Conference on Performance Appraisal and Review held in 1957 at Michigan, sponsored by the Foundation for Research and Human Behavior, pointed out that appraisal ratings are usually bunched at the good end of the scale, and that rater differences are sometimes more marked than differences between those rated. One reason is that the supervisor has to justify his evaluation to the subordinate, and few supervisors possess the desired insight and tact to tell a subordinate how to improve. The easiest way out is to limit the evaluation discussion to the employee's good points. Often the administrator rationalizes his all-above-average ratings by stating that the library does not hire or retain average or below-average people.

Kirchner and Reisberg conclude that better supervisors tend to show more spread and variation in their ratings, and also tend to give more regard for independent action and creative thinking on the part of their subordinates. More effective supervisors also tend to check a greater number of least strengths, whereas the less effective supervisors tend to rate subordinates much more alike.²³ Thompson and Dalton found one manager who expressed the belief that low performers should be given extremely low scores—possibly even lower than they deserved—to encourage them to leave. It was found, however, that this approach was more likely to influence them to stay to try to gain security.²⁴ The supervisor should not deliberately adjust his ratings to try to achieve a particular purpose but should be able to defend his evaluation with specific instances of good and poor performance.

EFFECTIVENESS OF APPRAISALS— SURVEY FINDINGS

The questionnaire asked several questions about the effectiveness of the appraisal technique in the opinion of the director (or person responding to the survey questionnaire). The questions included: How effective do you think your appraisal method is in . . .

- pointing out employee shortcomings?
- giving employees encouragement to improve performance?
- helping make reliable judgments upon which to base salary increases?
- giving the person an opportunity to discuss problems?
- helping eliminate bias and favoritism in ratings?

Regardless of the appraisal system used, the replies indicated that 26 percent felt that their method was "very effective," 64 percent thought their technique of appraisal was "somewhat effective," 8 percent considered it "ineffective," and 2 percent rated theirs as "completely ineffective."

Bias cannot be eliminated by the choice of a particular type of appraisal system according to a majority of writers. Rather the rater must become aware of bias tendencies so that he can attempt to avoid them in his ratings. There is more likely to be bias in an appraisal system where the supervisor does not have to confront the person appraised, since the discussion and questioning by the person appraised tends to bring out any bias in the ratings.

Failure of appraisal programs is due to inept techniques, ineffectual communication between rater and ratee, and the role conflict experienced by the rater. The type of form used has much less influence on the final results.

CONCLUSION

Whether formal or casual, appraisals are conducted in every organization. There is seldom any difficulty in identi-

fyng extreme patterns of behavior—the very good or the very poor—and not much time or money needs to be spent on the exercise. Appraisal systems are more essential for those who fall between these extremes.

Appraisal forms are useful at least for assuring a periodic review and assessment of the employee's contributions. Rating scale forms have many shortcomings, and it is difficult to judge a librarian's work performance by applying the same criteria used to evaluate teaching faculty. The best yardstick for measuring librarians is a form specifically designed to consider the special competencies of librarians. Ideally, two forms should be used: one to be completed by the individual, permitting him to list activity in research or publica-

tion, professional or personal development, and participation in professional, academic, or community affairs; the second form, to be completed by the librarian's supervisor, requiring essay-like summaries of the person's on-the-job performance, personal traits, and attitudes.

The supervisor has to accept the responsibility to judge the performance of other people. Often this responsibility is hesitantly taken because he feels uncomfortable in his role as a judge. It is this psychological barrier which underlies the failure of most evaluation systems. When a specific system fails, a common solution is to adopt a different evaluation instrument, but the underlying fault is with the people making the evaluations.

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