

Ick I Hate Evaluations

By Sue Pivetta

*A blind man will not thank you for a looking-glass.
English Proverb (18th century).*

If in the past my work evaluations were indeed a pure and true reflection of my work then quite possibly I would not have hated evaluations. I think back to years of getting and giving evaluations. My memories are fuzzy recollections of frustration, confusion, apathy, joy and resentment. High praise was a warm fuzzy. I 'love' my job (for at least another six months). Anything negative resulted in feelings of devaluing. They don't know me, don't appreciate me, spend way too much time finding fault! If the evaluation was bland, I would marvel at the sheer audacity - marking me simply mediocre! Call me wild, crazy, nuts, weird but - meets expectations - a huge insult.

Still - getting evaluations was not nearly as *icky* as giving them. There was no sanctioned way to evaluate! One Supervisor refused to give high marks, superior performance was expected after all. Superior performance was 'as expected'. No above average to her, as average was superior. Which if you look at it logically was quite a wonderful testimony to how she felt about the work - I think. If you could leap tall buildings you met expectations. Yet if you were on graveyard, your supervisor gave you superior if you would simply take a moment to *consider* leaping a tall building. Evaluations fluctuated, everyone knew it and each of us had our own internal evaluation - which was basically "*I'm great and I'll ignore any ratings or comments that do not acknowledge my greatness.*" What was needed was a buy in or belief that the evaluation process was a valid measurement of the work. It is said that it is easier to sell a new perception than change a fixed one.

I don't think things have changed much. Evaluations in some agencies are not only useless but can be damaging. What needs to be done to iron out this wrinkle in the system? The evaluation process is critical for liability, motivation, morale, quality assurance, training, re-training, promotion, management - the list goes on. So how does a manager go about doing a status check on the evaluation process? We offer some basic steps to Loving Evaluations as a worthwhile and necessary part of any healthy work environment.

Step One: X Marks the Spot

First you must know where your evaluation process, form and reputation are. What is the current reality? The first step is to gather information. This can be done with an informal survey. It is said that where an opinion is general, it is usually correct.

You could ask the following questions.

1. Is the evaluation system working for you as a supervisor or trainer?
2. Do you have enough time, information, guidance on how to do evaluations?
3. What is the thought of the employees regarding their evaluations?
4. Do you and the employees feel the evaluation form is valid and useful?
5. Is the evaluation process concerned with quality control, training, motivation, learning, planning?
6. What do you believe would improve our evaluation process or form?

Step Two: Define the Work Expected

A funny thing happened on the way to court. During a trial that involved a Call Taker that made several mistakes on a call, the Supervisor was asked to list the errors. Several errors were noticed by the Supervisor. The training records were displayed along with the evaluation forms. The question was posed, *"Where in this training and where on this evaluation form do you train or evaluate the person on their ability to do what you have just stated they did not do."*

So then the procedures are reflected in the training, the training reflects the requirements in the work. After training is completed, the evaluations reflect the expert valuation of the work being done by an individual. The evaluation form must be a list of expectations and the evaluator must have a process for assessing the necessary components of the work. The Golden Rule is that you are not allowed to evaluate a person on something they are not trained to do. And in court if it isn't in writing, it doesn't exist.

Step Three: Eliminate Ambiguity

With anything that must be done, there is a best way to do it. Therefore, the concept that we all do it different, or each person has his or her own perception of what is expected or what is mastery cannot be different. What does success in call taking or dispatching LOOK like? When a call is done right, what needs to happen? When many calls come in and all tasks are done right, what needs to happen? In your evaluation form, you have already defined mastery - it's the highest mark you can get. Begin with a new thought about mastery and strive to define it in your evaluation process. Each evaluator must understand what each rating looks like in performance language. Get all your evaluators on the same page.

If people in your agency perform the same job - different - it's time to figure out why. For most everything that must be done there is a "better" or best or safest way - and that is the way that should be done. If there are two camps on how to do the work - it's skillful leadership to have a clarification session. Find out what is being done different. Let them plead their side answering this question, *"Which way has the most attention to 1) safety, 2) speed and 3) accuracy?"*

Of course there are some tasks that are "benign" and those can be identified in the clarification session. In other words it can be done a number of ways without any loss of 1) safety, 2) speed (time) or 3) accuracy. Once these gray area tasks are identified the workers should have the choice of which way to handle it, without any negative feedback.

Step Four: Evaluate Only After Assessment

Supervisors need time to do the work-of-evaluating. The worker in Emergency Communications can hide errors, it's not like making a widget. An evaluator looks at the widget, tests the widget - if it's a good widget they did a good job, especially if they made many widgets in record time. Not so tangible here. The worker makes decisions independent of any evaluation - unless a tape is pulled for some reason. The supervisor must look at the work and be able to provide a perfect creation checklist from which to evaluate the work. This takes time.

The experienced ear just knows what is good work on a call, what is a good dispatch, what is poor work - but that's not enough! Gut feeling or expert knowing is just not enough validation. The process of evaluating the WORK means listening to a random selection of tapes over a reasonable amount of time. This sampling tape of calls could be provided with the evaluation as substantiation or demonstration of the skill, knowledge or attitude ratings. Also a evaluation session where the supervisor and the telecommunicator listen to tapes is very powerful. Now you have a crystal-clear, unsentimental, potent and indisputable evaluation process and is proof positive of the work assessment.

Step Five: Rethink Assessing Attitude

Often it is difficult to assess workplace attitude directly. Sometimes supervisors believe they can assess an attitude by their own "feelings" about another. This is not correct. Attitude is actually defined a set of beliefs that may result in a set of behaviors. It is behavior that should be assessed and the behavior must be pointed out immediately and documented (not just felt). The attitudes are not important but the behavior is, so define the behavior. Tardies, abuse of sick leave, failure to follow through on tasks, disruptive in the Com Center, arguments with other workers, abrupt language with citizens, failure to use customer service tactics, and so on. All these behaviors are job requirements and must be experienced, defined and evaluated - not just sensed.

*After all, it is hard to master both life and work equally well.
So if you are bound to fake one of them, it had better be life.
Joseph Brodsky*

Conclusion

For whatever reason - if your evaluation process may be dysfunctional, it doesn't take much investment to turn it around. The key word here is investment. Leaders show their values by what they invest in. The leader first notices, then reflects, gathers knowledge, then acts. The behavior of the leader also reflects attitude. Valuing the evaluation process states a belief in quality, growth, change, improvement and growth of your people. The largest investment comes in time. In addition, it is the responsibility of the leadership to plan, direct and assess the needs and direction of the agency. Telecommunicators deserve to be the best they can be. It is the responsibility of leadership to ensure employees know what is expected of them and how they are doing. Give them what they deserve.

About the Author:

Sue Pivetta is President of Professional Pride Training Co., Inc. Since 1989 she has worked with 9-1-1 agencies to improve motivation, morale, training and evaluation systems. Sue works as a consultant, expert witness, trainer and agency helping hand. You can reach her with questions or an evaluation process or form review (or just to discuss evaluations) at **1.800.830.8228**. Contact is available through her company website at **www.911Trainer.com** or email **Sue@911trainer.com** .