

Essay 5: Employee Evaluation

Much of what we cover in these essays refers to teams with system development and maintenance responsibilities. A focus on systems shifts assessment away from individual performance and toward system faults. While the next essay is entitled “Ending Hierarchy” and is a pro-system manifesto, the end (of hierarchy) is not near. Organizations may try to avoid the worst excesses of a command-and-control hierarchy, but they are unlikely to ditch the structure altogether. Thus, I must discuss the evaluation of people.

The organization will still wish to have one person make decisions about the performance, salary changes, and continued employment of the others directly below them in the hierarchy. We will still gather people with similar responsibilities together and call them an office, like academic advising, even though some advisors may sit on retention system teams or even curriculum development system teams. One person will understand the duties and performance of all academic advisors better than one person might understand the duties and performances of all members of a retention team, which might include faculty, student affairs personnel, financial aid advisors, academic advisors, and students. Some organizations have tried to solve the office vs. system dilemma with matrix management, attempting to arrive at command and control by giving a person two bosses. I have only heard rumors of chaos with such systems.

Employee evaluation is done by department heads of their office staffs and by vice presidents of their department heads. When I receive an employee evaluation form from human resources, my hackles go up. The form seems to imply that the only time that I talk with an employee about their job, their future, and their needs is when I get that form. While this may be true of some bosses, I find the HR form process degrading for both the supervisor and the employee. Perhaps I’m overly sensitive. I feel that I’m being told that I don’t know how to communicate. I also sense that the employee feels under pressure to show good results during the evaluation session and therefore, as a result, becomes defensive. The exercise often leaves the relationship a little more fragile. I hate to rate an employee, using a five-point scale on seven characteristics that are both arbitrary and vague. Some are of little importance; others have a dozen subtopics worth discussing.

My overall rating of employees has three levels: outstanding, coasting, and in progressive discipline.

With those in progressive discipline, I work closely with the head of HR. I want HR to watch my every move and advise me. I want the process to take enough time so that the underperforming person may find another job. If we are having a communication problem, the person may vow to reform and say they misunderstood their responsibilities. Fine, let them perform adequately, and I will halt the progressive discipline process and move them to “coasting” status.

The purpose of my categories is to make a clear distinction between those who are in trouble and those who are not. When I change jobs and accept a new position and inherent people, almost everyone is in the “coasting” category. They do their jobs. I have no trouble with that. As I move toward redesign, I involve them. I listen to them.

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Occasionally, someone figures out that I really don't like doing "supervision." In fact, I don't do much of it. That person will come to me and say, "I get it! I'll be back." They return with a plan on how they want to rearrange their office and how to merge it with another office or some such great idea. I never asked them to do this. This is my rare outstanding employee. When I change jobs, I take them with me.

I was once asked by a for-profit higher education holding company to merge the finance, bursar, and financial aid offices of three acquisitions. As it turned out, none of the existing employees wanted to leave their current locations to come to the city where the head office was located. I needed to hire an entirely new staff. Because I was traveling to the acquisitions to wind down operations, I could only do video interviews. I relied on Human Resources to weed out people who did not have the skills or did not seem to have the relationship proficiencies we needed. HR did a good job. I, however, had one question for the applicants for clerk positions in my online interview: "Did you ever do something in a previous job that you were not asked to do, about which you were proud, even though you may not have gotten credit for the effort?" I hired those who had interesting stories to tell about their own initiative. I was also able to pay them much better than the going salary for clerks.

They were terrific. I remember a clerk coming into my office, saying, "I've been looking into something. It takes us five to seven days to get financial aid refund checks out to students using the bursar system. That's a hardship for the students. Accounts payable says that they can turn the checks around in one day without any difficulty getting the entry into the students' accounts and the accounts receivable system." I said, "Okay. Let's do it." I told you that I didn't like to supervise, didn't I?

Also, before I knew what texting was, these clerks were texting with students who had questions.

Regarding evaluations: I try to convince HR that I have a better way to communicate with employees than the HR forms. If I can't convince HR, I usually ask my staff to fill out the forms themselves. When they have completed the forms, I sit down with them and ask them to talk with me about why they filled the form out the way they did. I have never had to ask them to change an answer. I have also never needed to use a form with an employee on progressive discipline. The discipline letters are very detailed.

Instead of the HR forms, my preferred method of periodic assessment is to ask the employee to answer these questions. 1) How would you change your job description and why? 2) What is blocking our office from doing a better job? 3) What new skills or knowledge would you like to gain and how can I help you gain those skills? 4) How should I change the way I do my job to help you do your job better?

I don't want to list their "strengths." I want to know how their job should be changed to take advantage of their strengths.

I don't want to list their "weaknesses." I want to know what they would like to learn to do a better job, or even just to be a better person.

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I don't want to know how to get more work out of them. I want to know what they can suggest that will improve what the office does.

I don't want to rate them. I want to know how I can change to help them work more effectively.

As a final thought, there is another class of employee: those I must fire immediately.

I have fired thieves. You can't be caught putting a case of college lightbulbs in your trunk, driving home, and expect to work the next day.

I have fired embezzlers. You can't pocket some of the cash a student tenders. You can't authorize checks to a nonexistent business that just happens to be you. (I'm sorry to say that this person had done this for years, as her supervisor went blind, and I had to ask that she be sent to prison.)

I have fired fighters. I had made it clear that fighting was a firing offense, regardless of who "started it." I fired both men—immediately. You can run. You can protect yourself, but you can't pick up a two-by-four and fight back.

As you can see, although I invite people to evaluate themselves, I do set standards. I am nice, but I am not a pushover. I reward initiative. I do not take credit for the ideas of others; I take credit for creating the space for new ideas to appear. I make it clear that, unless you are in progressive discipline, I will not give you a negative evaluation on any point. Don't worry! What really counts is working together to make the organization more effective. You'll get credit for that.

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