

More Form Than Substance, *Performance Evaluation Forms*

By Lesley Sifers, Tax Favored Benefits, Inc.

I have lost count of the times I've heard a manager say, "These evaluation forms are terrible. They just don't do the job." The first rule is: Forms do not evaluate performance – managers do! However, in twenty-some years of front-line HR work, I have seen evaluation forms that were six pages of questions, vague, unnecessarily complicated and downright awful. One of my favorites was a form that asked this question: "Is the employee's work accurette (sic)?" Don't you just love that? It's no wonder some managers complain.

Most evaluation forms are nothing more than a list of topics with a small amount of space for the reviewer to make comments. A common rating scale includes five performance levels ranging from "Outstanding" to "Unsatisfactory." The words vary, but it's still the same grading system we remember from elementary school. Sometimes the ratings are assigned a numerical value in an attempt to make the process seem more objective.

In many companies, the employee is given a copy of the list and asked to rate their own performance. Most employees absolutely hate having to do this. Have you ever noticed that your top people often rate themselves lower than you would? Do some problem people consider themselves "Outstanding" in most areas? Soliciting the employee's input is a good idea but the way it's commonly done is, frankly, a waste of time.

There are only three meaningful performance categories: **Knowledge, Skills & Abilities** and **Behavior**. Likewise, there are only three performance levels that matter: **Meets Requirements**, **Does Not Meet Requirements** and **Exceeds Requirements**. And, as far as employee input, wouldn't it be more helpful to know about things that hinder performance, training needs, or an employee's personal and professional goals? Do we really need an employee to tell us that she/he has "Outstanding" attendance, qualities or some such thing?

Instead of checklists and five-step ratings, use a format that gives the reviewer an organized way to document performance in the three preceding categories. You only need to use the three performance levels (ratings) previously listed. That alone removes some of subjectivity from the process. After all, what is the difference between "Above Average" and "Outstanding?" Does it really matter?

Replace the trite and demoralizing employee "Self Evaluation." Instead, provide the employee with a form that asks three or four questions. Ask about problems or frustrations, personal and professional goals, training needs, or special accomplishments during the year. Questions can be as simple as, "What do you like best (or least) about your job?" You can change the questions periodically. The form simply provides a standardized way to capture information.

Use a third page for **Planning** for the future. Manager and employee jointly address strengths, weaknesses and future needs. What skills will be needed in the future and what will the manager expect? Will training or education be required? What behaviors must change? How can the employee do better? What can the manager do to help? What might happen if the employee does not improve?

If you want a real Performance Evaluation system, as opposed to just more paperwork, you need to develop better tools. The format I am suggesting has a lot of "white space" and requires a reviewer (and the employee) to do more than check boxes. Without training and encouragement, some managers will object just as loudly as they do about the forms you use now. Make every effort to bring managers into the process of developing your system and understanding how to use it to their advantage.

If you would like a free sample of the type of form described here, call the HR Help Line at 800-683-3440 or e-mail to lesley@taxfavoredbenefits.com.