

**THE BILL BLACKWOOD
LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE OF TEXAS**

**PEER EVALUATION AS A COMPONENT OF
COMPREHENSIVE PERFORMANCE EVALUATION**

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by

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ABSTRACT

The research paper for The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas explores the issues involved in utilizing peer evaluation as a viable addition to the Abilene Police Department Performance Evaluation Manual. After a brief history, the paper points out that single raters, generally immediate supervisors, cannot sufficiently observe their subordinates to adequately evaluate their performance. Utilizing the available literature, the author builds a case for incorporating peer evaluation into the performance system already in place to supplement the immediate supervisor's evaluations because co-workers have been shown to be as reliable and accurate in assessing performance. He concludes by recommending experimentation and subsequent adoption of peer evaluation into the Abilene PD performance manual.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research project is to examine whether or not to include peer evaluation as a component of the overall performance evaluation system of the Abilene Police Department and other departments with similar performance appraisal systems.

The problem is too often supervisors do not observe employee performance as often as they should and when they do, quite often the employee performs differently than he would if supervision was not present. As a result, supervisors get less than "true" pictures of behavior and performance. This "missing" information could result in inaccurate performance reports and could unnecessarily demoralize and antagonize employees who are performing to acceptable levels. As indicated by Vaughn (1981), "Many aspects of a police officer's job are difficult, if not impossible, to quantify and measure; and the absence of ever present supervision creates difficulties in assessing the individual's overall performance" (p.58).

This project is directed to the officers, supervisors, and the administration of the Abilene Police Department but it may also be useful to the administration of any department interested in developing a comprehensive performance evaluation system and attempting to deal with similar difficulties in observation techniques and documentation.

Research will include an examination of current literature, including periodicals, law enforcement journals, other law enforcement research projects of the Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, and other publications on the subjects of performance evaluation and peer evaluation. Specific attention will be directed to examining the benefits and drawbacks of peer evaluation in law enforcement performance appraisal.

This project will result in a recommendation to the administration of the Abilene Police Department to modify the current Performance Evaluation Manual to include peer evaluation as a component of an overall comprehensive evaluation system.

HISTORICAL and THEORETICAL

Since the 1960's when policing began to move toward professionalism, appraisal systems in police organizations have become almost universal as a tool used to measure performance, develop career strategies, determine eligibility for promotion or transfer, and as an indicator of progress toward department goals and objectives (Kramer, 1995).

Most systems, regardless of design, base the results of an appraisal, completed by the immediate supervisor, on comparing employee performance against a group of preset standards. This comparison is based, in theory but seldom in practice, on the supervisor observing first hand the employee performing his assigned tasks, documenting the observations, and then comparing the performance to a standard. This notion that only supervisors can evaluate performance is reinforced by the Accreditation Manual for Law Enforcement Agencies in its definition of a rater: "The supervisor who evaluates the performance of a subordinate" (p. 35 -4). The reality in most departments is that an employee seldom sees his supervisor during the course of his work day (Kramer, 1995). Without first hand knowledge of employee performance, how can supervision expect employees to accept evaluations to be fair, accurate, and legitimate? When evaluation is based not on observation but rather feelings or innuendo, then it cannot be effective and, quite the contrary, the whole evaluation process loses credibility (Kramer, 1995). The results can be very harmful and demoralizing.

Because supervision is often incapable (or unwilling), due to other administrative tasks, time constraints, or sheer numbers of subordinates, to expend the time and energy needed to adequately observe and document an employee's performance, the question then becomes who is in the best position to observe employee behavior? Kramer (1995) answers there is a general "acknowledgment that peers are in a better position to observe officer behavior than are supervisors" (p.29).

If performance appraisal is as simple as Ratliff (1994) makes it seem, i.e., "It appears to be one person observing another performing a task and reaching a conclusion about how adequately that task has been performed" (p.2), then it appears plainly evident that the best person to make that judgement is the one who is consistently standing beside the employee performing the task. The person who sits beside his fellow employee in roll call, who makes the back up call, or who assists at an accident investigation, is in the best position to see job performance close up every day. Kramer (1995) adds that it is also crucially relevant that "the mere presence of a supervisor on the scene can alter officer behavior and give a false impression of performance" (p.32).

Two decades ago, team policing was in vogue and police managers sought to build teams of officers to solve problems. Team policing has fallen by the wayside but it is still a very good idea to try to instill team spirit in the police agency. Vaughn contends that "the single dimension approach [to performance appraisal] sees the employee in the context of being purely a subordinate and not necessarily an associate"(p.58). This subjugation of the employee directly conflicts with one of Maslow's hierarchy of the basic human needs, to belong, or be a part of the group.

Vaughn (1981) counters this single dimension approach with "Peer evaluation capitalizes upon the individual's basic social needs in a positive and constructive way that can produce improved job performance and a greater degree of appropriate organizational behavior"(p.58).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND PRACTICE

Ron Harris, Deputy Chief of Police of the Abilene, Texas, Police Department, speaking during a seminar in 1994 on performance evaluation, reduced the performance evaluation system to its bare essentials when he said, "You have to tell them what you want them to do, show them how to do it, watch them do it, and then tell them how they did." With regard to the third essential, too often supervisors expend too little energy or time in "watching them do it."

"Because the quality of police service cannot always be measured in increments of production, appraisals are by nature somewhat subjective. If the employees perceive the subjectivity becoming excessive, they are likely to reject the feedback. "

Abilene Police Department Performance Evaluation Manual, 1994

Huckabee and Grosskopf (1992) offer the common sense dictum that the person completing the evaluation should be the one "who has immediate, direct and regular observation of the officer during the course of his duties"(p.80). Kramer (1995) takes this a step further when he says, "If that person is not a supervisor, then perhaps alternate methods of evaluation would be more effective"(p.32).

Performance evaluation based on intuition and hearsay is extremely unfair, usually grossly inaccurate, and is readily seen as such by the employee. It is then a natural tendency for him to

become angry and turn to his peers to ask the question, "Do you see me this way?" (Weaver, 1987) This tendency is natural because the employee knows, without thinking, that his peers have seen more of him performing in the field than has his supervisor. Negative criticism that is based on observation and that is constructive is usually accepted as directed toward personal improvement.

A clear example of this dissatisfaction came during the 1996 performance appraisal cycle of the Abilene Police Department, when, over a year's time, one sergeant made very few observations of his officers, claiming that he did not want to be perceived as, "looking over their shoulder" or "bird dogging" them. As a result, the performance evaluations he did were based mainly on empirical data, such as in increase or decrease in traffic stops and citations. When questioned about calls he might have made with his officers, his responses included lack of time, administrative duties, and when pressed, "bird dogging." Many of his officers individually came to this researcher (the sergeant's immediate supervisor) to complain about their evaluations. Almost all of them ask the question, "How can he evaluate me when he never makes calls with me?" Several of them also made comments such as, "Wouldn't it be better if we evaluated each other on things like judgement, decision making, and service to the community?" and, "At least we see each other every day."

Jerald Vaughn, writing for *The Police Chief* magazine in 1981, said that peer evaluation, "recognizes that any single rater, regardless of his position, is not necessarily able to observe the employee's total character, personal attributes and professional skills. Consistent with that idea, fellow employees in a close day-to-day working relationship with an individual make useful, pertinent observations about that person's performance and traits"(p. 58)

In an article on peer evaluation, the statement is made:

"Peer evaluation is potentially one of the more effective means of evaluation for law enforcement. It is only potentially effective, however, because it is rare to find it in use in law enforcement, even though a number of studies and authors have advocated its use" (Kramer, 1995, p 26).

Before examining the studies, a question comes to mind regarding Kramer's statement, and that is, "If peer evaluation has been shown to be such an effective tool, why is its use not already universal?" One answer may be that if peer evaluation is done properly, it can be costly in both time and eventually, resources. Time must be spent in developing standards, evaluation instruments, and training, both of officers and supervisors. The time expended on these projects means time away from primary duties, which results in replacement costs such as paid overtime at time and a half or time off at the rate of time and a half. In larger departments this may not be a factor, but in medium and smaller departments it is a grave concern.

A study by Kevin Love (1981) of a medium sized municipal police department used nine common performance aspects of patrol officers. One hundred forty-five officers evaluated each other, using these nine performance standards. Friendship between rater and ratee was also assessed through a series of rating scales. When compared to squad supervisor ratings, the peer evaluations were essentially the same. After friendship ratings were factored in, the evaluations still closely mirrored that of the squad supervisor. Love (1981) noted in his conclusion that, "The use of officers in the performance appraisal process dealing with other officers is justifiable on the grounds that officers can provide accurate and consistent performance information" (p.149).

Most police departments probably use trait rating scales in some form to evaluate such

dimensions as "decisiveness" and "dependability." "Most people in police work believe that intangible factors such as attitude, judgement, and interpersonal skills are most critical to successful police job performance" (Herrington, 1992, p.4). These traits or dimensions are thought to be related to good performance in the police field. When supervisor and peer ratings of the same traits were compared in a 1991 study, Falkenberg, Gaines, and Cordner found very little correlation. They found dimensions of this sort to be vague as criteria for performance evaluation. At the same time, they noted that peer evaluations tended to be more "consistent" and "valid" than those of the supervisors (Kramer, 1995, p.26). As Ron Harris puts it, "rate the performance, not the person (1994).

Peer evaluation has also been used in a study done at the University of Alabama Law Enforcement Academy in 1992 by Schumacher, Scoggin, Howland, and McGee. Eighty-two trainees evaluated their peers in such areas as interpersonal responsiveness, technical ability, and overall likelihood of success as law enforcement officers. These evaluations were compared to academy instructor rankings and, one year later, to job supervisor ratings. The results show that peer evaluation can be a reliable predictor of future behavior.

As part of a research project completed in 1993 for The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute, George Buenik, Jr. surveyed twelve law enforcement agencies of various sizes, one large corporation, and the U.S. Air Force, comparing performance evaluation systems and forms. Several interesting factors instantly capture the eye when assessing his results. The first, sadly, is that one agency had no performance evaluation system of any description; the reason given was that it was felt that the evaluation process "causes more harm than good"(p.29) Nine of the entities provide no training or instructions for supervision in correctly completing the

evaluation process. Thirteen of the fourteen evaluate some combination of traits solely or as part of a more complex evaluation system which also includes goals, job behaviors, and tasks. Of the thirteen evaluation instruments returned by agencies responding to Buenik's request, none included peer evaluation.

DISCUSSION OF RELEVANT ISSUES

The key issues that have surfaced the examination of this topic are:

- a) the inability of supervision to adequately observe performance to the level necessary for effective evaluation;
- b) a clear indication, through scientific research, that peer evaluation has been shown to provide valid, accurate information on performance;
- c) reluctance on the part of police management to accept, or at least experiment with, peer evaluation as a tool to assess performance;
- d) such reluctance may be based in part on cost factors;
- e) peer evaluation requires an open atmosphere of communication to facilitate acceptance of constructive criticism.

It has been shown that supervisors, even when making honest effort, cannot (or do not) observe the performance of employees with sufficient frequency to make valid judgements about performance and the performance evaluations of those employees suffer as a result. Co-workers, not so encumbered with administrative duties and other time drains and placed in a position to observe by the nature of the job, can and do make perfectly valid judgements about the performance of their peers on a daily basis.

The research suggests that peer evaluation can provide unbiased, relevant, and consistent information concerning performance. Peer evaluations show direct correlation to that of supervisors and often are more accurate in assessing job related tasks. The issue of friendship, as shown in the Love study, does not necessarily adversely affect the ratings of a contemporary.

It has also been shown that peer evaluation is not utilized by the community of law enforcement managers. To this point, it has only been in scientific study that peer evaluation has been used as an instrument to appraise performance of police. If an agency has tried peer evaluation, there is no evidence or documentation of the results of its efforts. This researcher found this to be most curious because the scientific evidence indicates peer evaluation to be quite reliable and valuable.

Cost may be a factor when managers consider whether to use peer evaluation. There are indeed some costs associated with adopting peer evaluation into the department's performance evaluation system, mainly in the start up phase. The forward thinking police manager must evaluate and balance these start up costs against the potential rewards of improving the evaluation system into one that provides a more realistic picture of department performance.

Another reason may be that, "The success of peer evaluation is dependent upon an organizational climate that is conducive to open, honest communications and the personal integrity, maturity, and professional attitude of co-workers in making fair, impartial, and objective observations of a fellow employee in the work setting" (Vaughn, 1981, p. 58). Police officers tend to be a close knit group in the face of adversity, but they also tend to be a suspicious and guarded society of individuals when their behavior or performance is the subject of review. When facing adversity, self confidence, real or imagined, is key to survival. This self-confidence does not lend

itself readily to being questioned or criticized, constructively or otherwise. In such an atmosphere, open communication and honesty are severely hampered.

To combat this "syndrome" and facilitate the open communication required for effective peer evaluation, management will need to foster a "safe" working environment where acceptance of constructive criticism, not only from above, but also laterally and from below, becomes commonplace. One positive step in this direction is to adopt an evaluation system that not only includes top down appraisal, but from the bottom up. When officers realize that it is possible to constructively criticize a superior without retribution, they lower their guards and quickly become open to lateral evaluation as well.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The stated purpose of this project has been to examine the viability of utilizing peer evaluation as an alternative resource of the Abilene Police Department Performance Evaluation Manual.

Performance evaluation is vital in determining employee performance and, by default, department progress toward goals and objectives. To be as effective as possible, today's police manager must insist on the most accurate, reliable, and detailed assessment of department performance. He can ill afford to rely on performance evaluations that are based only in part on direct observation.

As stated, the main problem or key issue in performance appraisal is that supervision is seldom in a position to directly observe employee performance and thus performance evaluations completed by supervision are based solely on empirical data, or worse, intuition, rumor and

innuendo. Generally speaking, supervision strives to observe employee performance but sheer numbers of employees and lack of time to allot to each result in insufficient documentation to draw valid conclusions about employee performance. A further consequence is that employees are aware of this inefficiency and become disgruntled, demoralized, and unproductive when presented with an evaluation they know does not truly represent their work product.

The recommendation is made to the administration of the Abilene Police Department, and any other department that is unsatisfied with its performance evaluation system, to appoint staff members, supervisors, and employees to committee and challenge them to consider peer evaluation as a means to increase the validity of performance evaluation. "Actively involving supervisors and officers in the development of the evaluation tool is one of [the] critical factors in the development of a useful and accepted evaluation tool" (Cruz, 1994, P 11). Questions of method and development of evaluation instruments should be left open and input should be sought from throughout the department to foster acceptance (Sheehan, 1989). A suggestion is made that when developing an evaluation instrument, committee members consider behaviorally anchored rating scales, (BARS) because they have been shown to be superior to plain trait rating (Bradley, 1987).

Peer evaluation will provide the police manager, supervision, and the employees with a much clearer picture of department performance. The police manager, always concerned with how his vision of department progress is being carried out, will gain new insight into street level performance and staff performance. While not relieving the immediate supervisor of his responsibility to observe employee behavior and performance, peer evaluation will be helpful in filling in some of the gaps, perhaps revealing some characteristics he was unaware of without peer

evaluation. Employees will find increased job satisfaction knowing that what they have accomplished is being recognized, suggestions for improvement are based on a truer picture of the daily job performance, and perhaps, a new respect for their counterparts who have been instrumental in honestly and fairly critiquing their performance.

The progressive police manager is always willing to give proven ideas a chance to increase effectiveness, productivity, and morale in his department. Peer evaluation has been proven, time after time, to be worthy of just such a chance in the law enforcement profession.

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