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Employee Evaluation and Assessment Skill Development

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Across higher education today, there are constant calls for the development of a culture of assessment. Emphasis on increased accountability and the need to demonstrate the effectiveness of our efforts have resulted in significant attention being paid to the evaluation of programs and services and to the assessment of student learning and development outcomes. Less attention has been given, however, to the assessment of professional staff outcomes, especially in the critical area of assessment skill development. As skills in assessment and evaluation become more crucial to effective practice, supervisors must attend more closely to the learning, development, and skill levels of their staff members. Supervisors must move beyond the use of required annual performance evaluation forms to create and implement staff development plans as an important component of effective supervision.

Employee supervision is one of the most complex responsibilities for student affairs leaders (Tull, 2006). The activity of supervision can create tension and present challenges for student affairs professionals. To add to the challenges associated with supervision, supervisors must possess a wide variety of skills to accomplish their jobs effectively.

One such skill is the ability to conduct employee evaluations/appraisals. Performance evaluation in student affairs is a central staffing component, and its administration is a required function for many who hold supervisory positions (Creamer and Winston, 1999). For many supervisors, the ongoing evaluation responsibilities are the following: 1) overseeing performance-related activities, 2) setting performance goals/plans, 3) conducting performance assessments, and 4) revising performance goals/plans (Creamer & Janosik, 2003).

Another important skill that supervisors must possess is the ability to build a culture and appreciation for assessment within their units or divisions. As more pressure is placed on the

field of student affairs to show that it adds value to the collegiate learning environment, it will be essential that student affairs professionals develop and utilize assessment skills. Supervisors will be charged with aiding those they supervise in developing assessment skills, and it will be imperative that they help make assessment skill-building part of their employees' professional development plans, goals, and activities.

This article provides an overview of employee evaluation. Specifically, it details how supervisors must keep outcomes in mind when assessing employee performance, review the importance of supporting staff, and highlight the relevance of staff development plans and their link to performance appraisal. The article concludes with detailing methods of assessing staff performance and reviewing a process of aiding employees in building assessment skills as part of their professional development plans, goals, and activities.

#### Operational Definitions

The following definitions and concepts were utilized in the development of the philosophical framework for this article:

1. *Synergistic supervision* - This definition denotes that “supervision should be viewed essentially as a helping process provided by the institution to benefit or support staff rather than as a mechanism for punishment for unsatisfactory performance” (Winston & Creamer, 1998, p. 30). Winston and Creamer suggest that the following items are characteristics of synergistic supervision: joint effort; dual focus; two-way communication; focus on competence; systematic, ongoing processes; goals; and growth orientation. This model was selected because of its dual focus on achievement of personal and professional goals and achievement of institutional goals.

2. *Performance appraisal/evaluation* - “involves the assessment of human performance and the intentional effort to improve individuals and the organization” (Creamer & Janosik, 2003, p. 149). Performance appraisal must be linked to supervision and staff development plans (Winston & Creamer, 1998).
3. *Staff development* - is a specific activity or event that is conducted or performed outside the experience of daily work to aid staff in the enhancement of skills (Winston & Creamer, 1998). Additionally, staff development activities can be conceptualized in three categories: skills, knowledge, and personal qualities (DeCoster & Brown, 1991).
4. *Assessment* - “the process of defining, selecting, designing, collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and using information to increase students’ learning and development” (Erwin, 1991, p. 15).

#### Moving Beyond the Human Resources Evaluation Form

Many student affairs practitioners acknowledge that performance evaluation/appraisal needs to be an essential component of the staffing process; however, when questioned about it, most individuals report that it is the weakest link in the staffing practices of their unit (Creamer & Winston, 1999). In most cases, supervisors in student affairs are required by institutional procedures to evaluate their staff through institutional forms (Creamer & Winston). Typically, the forms that supervisors use to evaluate staff are general templates developed by the institution’s human resource office, and for many supervisors the completion of the evaluation form is considered to be the entire performance appraisal (Creamer & Winston).

Unfortunately, for many employees the performance evaluation process is an event that occurs annually (if that often), involves a standard form in most cases, and is a process with little constructive purpose (Creamer & Winston, 1999). In order to better develop their employees and

to minimize negative feelings regarding performance evaluation, supervisors must move beyond solely utilizing the standard human resource evaluation form and begin to use techniques that will better develop their staff members. One such technique that will be reviewed in this article is the staff development plan. In addition to utilizing a staff development plan, it will be necessary for supervisors to support and nurture their employees in order to create an environment where performance evaluation is viewed in a more positive light.

### *Staff Development Plans*

The effectiveness of student affairs' contribution to the mission of higher education is dependent on the skills, knowledge, and abilities of its practitioners (Kuh & Komives, 1987). Supervisors inherit the important role of aiding their staff members in achieving their personal and professional goals. Those individuals who serve as supervisors must carefully plan their approach for completing the essential functions of employee skill development and performance appraisal (Creamer & Janosik, 2003). Supervisors should utilize the staff development plan approach to skill building in conjunction with performance appraisal. As noted earlier, staff development plans and activities should be closely linked to employee performance evaluation. Each staff member should work with his/her supervisor to co-construct a professional development plan and be accountable for its implementation (Winston & Creamer, 2002).

Hirt and Winston (2003) highlighted four central elements to consider when creating professional staff development plans: be cognizant of the role that staff development plays in the overall model of supervision; individualize staff development; engage staff members in the process; and ensure that professional staff development plans are intentional if they are to result in enhanced organizational and individual effectiveness. Staff development plans need to be approached with a clear understanding of each individual employee's motivations, level of

personal development, personal and educational background, breadth and depth of professional development experience, and the level of stability and structure of the institution and organizational culture (Winston & Creamer, 1998). For more information on designing staff development plans, the reader is encouraged to review Hirt and Winston's (2003) chapter, "Professional Development: Its Integration with Supervision Processes."

### *Supporting Staff*

Armino and Creamer (2001) highlighted the importance of supporting staff members and building a nurturing work environment. The establishment of a caring and open relationship between the supervisor and supervisee is critical (Winston & Creamer, 1998). Supervisors can foster personal growth and professional development in staff members by providing a safe space for forthright and honest conversation regarding employee performance (Stock-Ward & Javorek, 2003).

Professionals with supervisory responsibilities can begin to build a supportive work environment by providing ongoing and intentional individual supervision sessions with their staff members. Intentional and ongoing feedback will minimize the threat associated with the evaluation process and lay the foundation for building a successful staff development plan.

### *Assessment of Staff Performance*

Many supervisors tend to dread and resist the process of evaluating their staff, and to add to the challenges of performance review, many employees generally distrust the process (Creamer & Winston, 1999). Additionally, there are common errors made in performance appraisal, which include giving high marks to staff members one likes and low marks to those one does not like, assuming that a person who excels in one area excels in all areas, rating all staff members average to avoid perceptions of discrimination, being indiscriminately too harsh

or lenient, and allowing recent events to color judgments about an employee's entire performance (Creamer & Winston, 1999). Even with all of the challenges associated with performance evaluation, it is important to conduct performance appraisals that move beyond the institutional evaluation template because the development of employee abilities, knowledge, and skills are key factors in organizational success (Daily, 1997). This section will detail examples of ways to conduct performance appraisals that move beyond simply completing an evaluation form.

Many divisions of student affairs utilize institutional human resources forms to conduct evaluations; however, the profession must move beyond this practice in order to determine whether actual employee growth, learning, and development are occurring. Supervisors should use assessment techniques (i.e., assessment of specific learning and developmental outcomes), similar to those that many student affairs practitioners employ when working with students and programs on their campuses, to appraise employee learning and development. An important component of the process is the development of detailed position descriptions that accurately reflect the expectations of the employee and the skills required to fulfill them. Supervisors can conduct an initial assessment of employee skill and then work collaboratively with their employees to identify specific learning and developmental outcomes for their staff members. The supervisor can then design a staff development plan to create opportunities for his or her employees to achieve the established learning outcomes. The learning outcomes and the staff development plan should be tied to the mission of the employee's unit and linked to the employee's personal and professional goals. Well-written outcomes will facilitate the process of assessing their accomplishment.

In general, best practice would suggest the use of practical day-to-day professional development experiences, such as intentionally partnering with staff members to present at conferences or working with staff members to conduct research, so that supervisors can gain practical first-hand experience with how employees perform on tasks in real world settings. These practical evaluation opportunities can be co-constructed with employees and developed as part of their employee staff development plans.

Finally, emerging technology offers new mechanisms that can be used to track and document employee progress toward desired outcomes. One approach that is gaining momentum is the use of electronic learning portfolios as a potential method for tracking and evaluating staff development and performance. Electronic learning portfolios have recently become popular tools for documenting student growth, learning, and development. The learning portfolio concept can be adapted for use with employees. Supervisors can assist employees in building their electronic portfolios, which can be shared with supervisors and used as an assessment method for a comprehensive staff development plan. For more information on electronic learning portfolios, the reader is encouraged to review the following article by Chen and Mazow (2002), "Electronic Learning Portfolios and Student Affairs." Supervisors are recommended to use this technique only with those employees who express an interest in maintaining an electronic learning portfolio. Some employees could view this activity as another duty added to their already busy schedules, so it is important that if this activity is conducted, it is mutually agreed upon by the supervisor and supervisee.

#### *Assessment Skill Building as Part of Professional Development*

As divisions of student affairs continue to feel the pressure to assess their programs and services, it has become more important for staff members to build their skills in the areas of

assessment and evaluation. Supervisors must take intentional steps to add assessment skill building into employee staff development plans, which will assist employees with the expansion of their assessment expertise. The following serves as an example of the steps in creating a staff development plan for increasing skills in assessment.

*Step 1:* Create a supportive relationship with your employee.

*Step 2:* Assess the employee's current level of comfort, knowledge, and skills in relation to assessment and evaluation.

*Step 3:* Work collaboratively with employees to develop learning and developmental outcomes associated with building knowledge and skills in the area of assessment.

*Step 4:* Intentionally work with employees to build assessment plans that detail professional development activities, based on the needs assessment from Step 2, that will provide them with opportunities for achieving the identified outcomes.

*Step 5:* Create opportunities to participate with staff during practical professional development efforts. For example, supervisors could partner with employees to present a program regarding assessment at a professional association conference or work collaboratively with a staff member to develop an assessment plan for a service provided by their unit.

*Step 6:* Work with interested employees to develop electronic learning portfolios.

*Step 7:* Provide on-going and intentional feedback to supervisees during this process.

*Step 8:* Evaluate the effectiveness of the staff development plan by determining the extent to which the employees have achieved the desired outcomes, and make modifications as necessary.

In addition to the steps mentioned above, supervisors must explain and demonstrate the importance of assessment to their employees. It will be critical for the supervisor to hold employees accountable for acquiring the assessment skills identified in their staff development plans, and supervisors must role model for their employees the importance of building and being held accountable for assessment skill development.

### Conclusion

Supervision is a highly important component of the work of most student affairs professionals (Stock-Ward & Javorek, 2003). That duty to provide effective supervision can become more difficult if performance evaluation is not conducted properly. Through being intentional, role modeling, setting expectations, and utilizing staff development plans, supervisors can create work environments where performance evaluation can be seen as a positive process and tool. When employees view the evaluation process as positive and linked to their developmental goals, supervisors can utilize the eight steps identified in this article to aid staff members in developing assessment skills. In turn, employees can develop the necessary assessment skills to address the demand that has been placed on student affairs to show how the profession is adding value to the learning environment. Supervisors can play an important part in creating a culture of assessment in the development of their staff members, as well as in their programs, services, with the ultimate goal of positively affecting student learning and development.

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