

Getting Ready for County Staff Performance Reviews

Each year staff performance reviews take place in County Agricultural Extension Districts. Extension council members are directly or indirectly involved in providing feedback to staff for performance reviews. Direct involvement may mean the council personnel committee conducts reviews itself. For those counties with county supervisory staff, indirect involvement may mean the council personnel committee provides oversight and feedback to the supervisory staff conducting the reviews.

Purpose

The purpose of the performance review is to manage and improve the performance of employees in their respective jobs. Reviewing past performance over a specified time period gives the employer/supervisor a basis for rating the employee's performance based on areas of accomplishment and areas for growth. The review communicates the employer's/supervisor's definition and expectations of satisfactory performance.

Looking to the future allows the employer/supervisor and the employee to set goals and targets for the coming year and provides the employee clear expectations to meet. Goals provide a basis for planning professional development or training needs. The review includes suggestions for improving performance and how those suggestions can be followed. When the employee clearly understands the expectations of the job, he or she is more likely to experience less anxiety and have a positive attitude and motivation.

Conducting the Review

An appropriately conducted and adequately documented performance review process is necessary to protect the employer from accusations of discrimination or favoritism in the review process.

- The performance review and appraisal forms need to be based upon the job description. If the job description is too vague, it is difficult to define success or need for improvement, much less substantiate any grounds for dismissal. An annual review of the job description as part of the review process is highly recommended.
- Use one appraisal process and form for all employees, with different sections applicable to different jobs. Finding the perfect form is not as important as administering it with consistency.

The process and forms for a performance review must be fair, consistent, easy to understand, and legally defensible.

- This requires the use of standard forms that the requirements and standards are based on actual work of the employee, and that the process is consistently applied across employees and over time. Sample performance review forms can be found on the ISU Extension and Outreach Human Resource page.
- Evaluate and adapt these carefully for the needs of staff and office.

Before conducting the performance review:

1. Employer/supervisor sets a date for the review and communicates to the employee. Specify the length of the review and how it will be conducted.
2. Provide the standard review form to the employee including instructions on completing the form and deadline to return form to employer/supervisor.

3. Use a standard form (can be found on the Extension Human Resource website). The employer/supervisor and employee are to complete all sections prior to the meeting. The review period is the time since the last review meeting. Both employer/supervisor and employee should site specific examples supporting information in the review. Document areas needing improvement with suggestions for improvement. Document established goals and targets. Examples of appropriate goals include the following:
 - Employee will convert all mailing lists to Excel spreadsheets by December 1 and will use Excel to generate labels. The suggestions for accomplishing might include employer sharing in cost of Excel class at local community college or sending to a training session on campus.
 - Convert all newsletters to electronic distribution by January 1. Suggestions for accomplishing should be discussed to outline the sequence of tasks and determine what skills need to be acquired to accomplish this goal, as well as what options the employee sees as feasible for skill acquisition.

During the Review:

- Open the meeting with employee sharing highlights and council/supervisor giving feedback.
- Invite the employee to talk about his or her accomplishments and goals for the following year.
Discuss each item with council/supervisor providing additional feedback on the employee's performance using specific examples.
- Complete writing agreed upon goals for next year and explanation in areas of strength and areas needing improvement.
- Employer/supervisor and employee sign the document. A copy is provided to the employee, and the signed original is filed in the personnel file. If the employee refuses to sign because of lack of agreement with the review, note the date the performance review was done adding a note to the file indicating that a copy was provided to the employee.

After the Review

- File appropriate documents in the employee's personnel file. If follow up dates were identified during the review, the employer/supervisor follows up at appointed times.
- Have a system in place for employees to include a written response to the review in their personnel file, should they choose to do so. Refer to the County Extension Personnel Handbook for guidance on this process.

Items to Consider

Performance reviews are completed, at a minimum, annually for each employee. Performance reviews should be conducted more frequently for new hires or those under probation. The performance review process must be consistent among employees. Annual reviews should be conducted at the same time of year. The process and form should not change dramatically every year as it will be more difficult to assess employee growth over time. Any changes should be introduced well in advance of the actual review dates, so employees know what to expect and how to prepare. Remember that the kinds of questions not allowed in the hiring process are also not allowed in the review process.

All parts of the review process must be applied in the same fashion for all employees – different procedures may not be defensible and may be interpreted as discriminatory. Forms, processes and intervals all need to be applied uniformly and follow document policy. Knowing this, it is important

to document suggestions and goals so the employee can refer back to them. Be aware this creates high anxiety for some people as they may be worrying about keeping their job, as well.

Honest and accurate documentation of actual performance problems is necessary. It is difficult to defend discipline, especially terminations, when an employee has a record of positive performance reviews. Document areas for improvement and expectations of employee behavior change or skill development as well as good performance. An employee's immediate supervisor is in the best position to conduct the performance reviews. If reviews are performed by different people using the same rating system, be sure one reviewer's average performance is not another's outstanding performance. This is especially critical if raises are based upon ratings given in the review.

An annual performance review should contain no surprises for the employee. This should be more of a recap or summary discussion of the prior year. Performance issues should be addressed (and documented) at the time they arise throughout the year. Employees generally want more immediate and regular feedback – the annual performance review alone is not adequate to manage performance. Regular discussions in a relaxed and nonthreatening setting can help both the supervisor and employee to understand and clarify expectations, challenges, changing job demands and goals. Regular communication reduces stress for the employee and he or she can focus on the job, not worry about unknown expectations or whether performance was acceptable. If a new direction and new skills are required of the employee to adapt to changes in staffing or programming, be sure to introduce these in a positive way and without overlooking past good performance. Job descriptions should reflect any significant changes. This is a costly process in terms of the supervisor's time, the employee's time in the review and in preparation, and in the lost production time that can occur with anxiety in anticipation of the review.

Do not add to loss of productivity by making the review a difficult and demoralizing experience or one that is so routine as to be a waste of time for the employee. A negative experience in the performance review can affect the employee's performance for months. The review should be motivating in a positive way and provide a clear path for the employee to improve performance.