

Giving or Receiving an Evaluation Shouldn't be a Dreaded Experience

What is the one time of year that employers and employees have come to dread? If you guess “employee evaluations”, you have hit the nail on the head. It's unlikely that anyone has ever heard someone say that they are excited about having a performance review. Or, being required to conduct personnel evaluations. Although the style, format and timing of a formal appraisal of an employee's work varies by cities and rural water districts, just as it would from private company to company, the feeling of dread that evaluations can bring about for both employees and employers (managers) is almost universal. Perhaps the stigma has some relevance compared to what the evaluation has been in the past or the manner in which the evaluation was conducted. But evaluations do not need to be feared. Evaluations are conducted to help employees meet the goal of the employer – and that primary goal by a city or RWD is to ensure that the best service possible is provided to customers.

Formal employee evaluations are usually held one time per year. But, believe it or not, evaluations should be held more often. Why? Unless very specific notes are written throughout the year there are many things that will be forgotten. Failure to have follow-up on a regular basis ends up not being fair to the employer or the employee. Without an ongoing exchange of information or review, it is very easy to focus on the recent evaluation. In other words, if the employee is meeting goals then some documentation of that through the year is helpful to both parties.

Accusations Lead to Animosity

At KRWA, we hear many complaints from water and wastewater system employees, from office staff, from city clerks, and others, that they believe they are not being treated fairly by the city or RWD. KRWA receives frequent calls from rural water directors to discuss staffing issues. Too often, someone on the council or the RWD board has an opinion about an employee or manager. And rather than sit



down with other members of the governing body and to discuss the issue with the employee without it becoming an emotional ordeal, the employee is absent from the discussion. The result is an employee who may be falsely accused of some issue but is not even aware of what he or she has allegedly done or not done. This results in a destruction of the morale of the employee. Frequently, the members of the board or council become divided over the issue. Street talk then takes over with animosity sometimes spreading in the community. Dear friends – as an option, watch the evening news to see the real strife and struggles by people in other countries who are trying to just survive another day. In other words, many of the local issues are trivial but then are inflamed to become big hindrances to effective leadership or efficient operations. Here's a message to those doing the evaluations: An

employee can't fix something he/she doesn't know is broken.

A personnel evaluation should be a productive experience. It gives the employer the opportunity to coach an employee on behavior or performance. An evaluation should be a two-way process to make the employee feel like the employer wants to help the employee to improve. Perhaps the employer

should allow the employee to attend certain training to be better equipped to handle the job. Or, contact a neighboring system to check how peers deal with certain matters.

As mentioned earlier, feedback should not wait until the next annual review. It is also very accurate that many managers or administrators do not like to deliver a negative performance review – and so the evaluation is delayed. An employee evaluation should be a productive experience and which should help inspire the employee to achieve the goals that are expected. But in many cases, the employee may not understand or know exactly what is expected. Many smaller

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The “DONT'S” of Employee Evaluations . . .

There are also some matters that the person(s) conducting the evaluation should avoid. Although some of these issues may initially seem to be appropriate, in the long run the relationship with the employee will be damaged.

1. Never ask the employee to evaluate themselves. Why? A poor employee will almost never suggest need for improvement and a good employee may not rate himself or herself high enough.
2. Don't raise issues you can't back up with examples. By maintaining employee records throughout the year, problems can be addressed by having the information available at the time of the evaluation.
3. Refrain from discussing personality traits. Focus on behaviors – not the personality.
4. Don't focus on the near-term. Keep records to make sure the evaluation reflects the performance over the entire time from the last evaluation.
5. Never over-rate an employee to motivate them. Employees who are given a higher rating than they deserve almost never live up to the expectation that they will improve. There is something any and every employee can improve on and good employees strive to do so.
6. Don't compare one employee to other employees. The evaluation is about that one person at that specific time.
7. Don't ask or bring up unrelated matters. Be honest with the employee about his/her performance and stop there.
8. NEVER make promises that cannot be kept. Good evaluations consider past performance and also look to the future. Making a promise or hinting at a possibility for advancement, when that option is likely not going to be available will be very negative to the employee. Both parties should sign the evaluation so there are no questions as to what was discussed.

water or wastewater utilities do not have an employee handbook/ Governing body members likely do not know all the work requirements but in very small systems, it's the board or council that is doing the evaluation. An employee handbook at least formalizes the expectations as to attendance and policies including benefits. A handbook is just as much a benefit to the employer as it is to the employee.

Evaluations can be a useful tool in employee relations. Most evaluations will start with a section of Personal Skills and a rating that defines whether the employee is needing improvement, not meeting, meeting or exceeding expectations. These sub-topics might include:

- Employee demonstrates skills to perform job-related tasks
- Employee reports to work on time
- Employee is rarely absent
- Employee manages time effectively
- Employee exhibits sound judgment in making decisions

The next portion may address inter-personal relationships. Does the employee have an enthusiastic attitude,

demonstrate courtesy, have a willingness to work with others? Does the employee gossip? Each of these items tells a great deal about a person.

Find Samples Online

There are many sample employee evaluations available online that may not fit any particular city or water district. But they are adaptable to fit your unique situation. Water and wastewater utilities may be quite different in the services they provide but actually the evaluation of employees has similarities throughout the country, from a small business to large municipalities. Employees are the single biggest asset of a company, water or wastewater utility.

As a final note, the goal of an employee evaluation is to enhance the relationship with the employees and improve performance for the utility or company. This not only creates a great working environment but leads to excellent customer service.

Attend the Annual Conference ...

I encourage readers to attend the Annual Conference & Exhibition March 27 – 29 at Century II Convention Center in Wichita. It's a great gathering of people from across Kansas and even surrounding states. I'll wager anyone can find someone else who has the same questions or who is trying to address the same issue – whether that be selecting products or materials or how that other system conducts employee evaluations. You may be surprised of what you might learn just by introducing yourself and striking up a conversation.

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