Managing people

Staff evaluations: More than a formality

Fifth article in a series on performance management.

This article builds on the first 4 articles in this series, published in the June, July, August, and September issues. The first article gave an overview of the performance management process. The next 3 articles covered the job description, initial competencies, orientation, goal setting, ongoing competencies, and coaching and mentoring. This article discusses the actual performance evaluation, including peer evaluation and self-evaluation, as a part of performance management.

An effective performance evaluation system must evaluate the work being done without causing job dissatisfaction for the staff. The system must also provide fair, honest, objective feedback to the staff while avoiding invading the privacy rights of the person being evaluated. With all of that, it must meet legal and regulatory requirements.

Ideally, employees will come out of the performance evaluation process with a good understanding of what is expected of them, how they can improve, how they have met the goals they have set, and what new goals they can strive for. Though managers and employees may see performance evaluation as a formality and a chore, if used skillfully, it helps employees renew their commitment to the job and the organization.

The evaluation form

The performance evaluation form may either be a part of the job description or a separate form that mirrors the functions and behaviors in the job description. (A sample is in the OR Manager Toolbox at www.ormanager.com. Look under “Performance management for perioperative staff.”)

In either case, the evaluation statements need to be objective and measurable. Objective descriptors that work well include: accuracy, timeliness, performance of duties, technical ability, and quality of work. Less objective descriptors to avoid include: friendliness, creativity, adaptability, and motivation.

Similar to the job description, the performance evaluation form has an area for evaluating both essential functions of the job and behavioral characteristics expected by the organization. The form should also include areas to record goals for the next year and evaluate goal attainment for the previous year.

Measuring performance

Most performance evaluation systems use a scale with numbers or words that measure success. For example, performance may be ranked from 1 to 5, with 5 being exemplary, or by using words from “exemplary” to “does not meet.”

The measures should be clearly defined so they can be assigned consistently. For example, the definition of a score of 3 or “meets” might read, “Consistently performs in a timely, accurate, effective, and/or appropriate manner with little or no direct supervision. Recognizes the need for and seeks guidance when appropriate.”

Many forms also include a weight for each performance item so departments can adjust the weights if a generic form is used. For example, when a generic RN job description is used for circulating RNs in the OR, the criteria relating to discharge planning may have a low weight because circulating nurses generally aren’t

Elements of performance management

1. Job description
2. Initial competencies
3. Orientation
4. Goal setting/performance planning
5. Competency assessment
6. Coaching, mentoring, and recognition
7. Performance evaluation
   • Self-evaluation
   • Peer evaluation
involved in discharge planning, while the weight may be higher for RNs on a medical-surgical unit.

The scores for each criterion on the evaluation are then multiplied by the weight and added to determine a total score.

The form also has an area for feedback for each job function and behavioral aspect being evaluated.

Preparing for a staff member’s yearly performance evaluation takes several steps culminating in a face-to-face meeting:

• self-evaluation
• peer evaluation
• manager evaluation.

Self-evaluation

Self-assessment is part of a good evaluation system. Staff members feel more involved in the assessment process if their input into their own work style is sought and included in the evaluation.

The self-evaluation form can be a copy of the formal evaluation form, or it can be a different form that includes the evaluative statements from the formal evaluation.

The staff member should be given a copy of this form with a brief memo outlining the process for filling out the form, returning it to the manager, and scheduling the evaluation session. This memo might also contain a statement about the value of self-evaluation, such as, “This is the time for you to ‘toot your own horn’ and make sure I know what you’ve achieved this past year so I don’t miss any of your accomplishments in the evaluation.”

It’s best to give the staff member a relatively short time to complete and return the form. Two weeks usually works well. Given a longer time, the staff member may put the form aside and forget to complete it in time.

What if a staff member doesn’t fill out the self-evaluation? Or it’s obvious because of a lack of detail that the person has spent no time filling out the form? One successful tactic is to give the staff member the blank form at the beginning of the formal evaluation session and require him or her to fill it out then before the evaluation takes place. Or you might have the person complete the evaluation on each point as the evaluation progresses. This staff member should then receive a low score on a criterion that addresses commitment to the job. One goal for the next evaluation period might be for the person to keep a log of successes and turn in a complete self-evaluation on time.

Peer evaluation

The literature takes 2 different stances on peer evaluation. Some experts feel evaluation by peers is an essential part of a performance evaluation. The Magnet Recognition Program for nursing excellence expects hospitals seeking Magnet Designation to perform peer review. One element for applicants to the Magnet Recognition Program states, “Describe the formal and informal performance appraisal processes used in the organization, including self-appraisal, peer review, and 360° evaluation (as appropriate) for nurses at all levels in the organization.”

On the other hand, T. C. Timmreck, who writes on health care human resource issues, asserts that peer evaluation is ineffective. Timmreck states, “Peer evaluation usually is either conducted in such a manner that the performance appraisal process violates the dignity, self-worth, and motivational process of the worker or becomes a waste of time due to the unwillingness of peers to comment on others’ work.”

Some organizations use peer evaluations only for the developmental portion of the performance evaluation, not for any review used to determine a pay raise. Staff members have been found to be less honest in review of fellow workers if they think their statements will affect someone’s raise.

If your organization includes peer review as a part of performance evaluation, there are a few things to take into account. First, the form used for peer evaluation should be essentially the same as the form for self-evaluation. This allows you to compare how a staff member sees herself or himself compared with how peers see the staff member.
Second, you need to determine how to choose the peers to review each staff member. A good approach is to have the staff member being evaluated choose a portion of the peers, while the manager also chooses a portion. Another approach is to make peer selection random. This approach removes bias in the choice of peers for the evaluation.

The peer evaluation forms should be distributed at the same time as the self-evaluation, again with a short memo stating when the forms are to be returned and a statement about the value of peer review to the staff as well as to the rest of the department.

**The manager’s evaluation**

When writing the formal evaluation, the manager needs to compile all of the information about the staff member being evaluated. Information comes from the self-evaluation, peer evaluations, and from the manager’s performance log kept throughout the year about each employee. (See the July OR Manager for a sample performance log.) Each functional area and behavioral criterion needs to be addressed individually and all information considered before a score is selected for that area. You may choose to average all of the scores provided by peers, by the person being evaluated, and your own score, with or without adding a weight to individual scores. Then add a statement of feedback for the criterion.

Some managers complete the entire evaluation form before the face-to-face meeting with the staff member, and some complete the evaluation form while the meeting is taking place. Either strategy works effectively.

Information from peer evaluations must be included in a way that protects the identity of the peer who provided the information. Comments from peer evaluations can be included in the feedback section in quotes, because often these comments from peers are very meaningful.

Notes on performance should be shared between the manager and the employee during the face-to-face meeting. Any discrepancies can then be used as a starting point for discussion concerning strengths, weaknesses, areas for needed training, and goals that can be set for the next year.

An effective performance evaluation meeting can move from welcome and “small talk” about the staff member’s family, hobbies, the weather or some other topic to a review of each criterion on the evaluation, finishing with goal setting for the next evaluation period.

No negative feedback should be given during this session that has not already been brought to the staff member’s attention. Negative information that is unexpected by the staff person can have a detrimental effect on the person’s job performance, affect the manager’s credibility, increase turnover, and hurt unit morale.

**Encouraging employee growth**

This whole process of performance evaluation takes time and commitment on the manager’s part. But if the performance evaluation system is handled well, the process can provide personal and professional growth for both the manager and the staff member. The result of a well handled performance review should be an increase in accountability, effectiveness, and commitment to the job. In the end, patients are the ones who benefit through a higher quality of care from a qualified, committed staff.

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**References**

