

GRIPE[®]

GRAHAM'S RULES for the IMPROVEMENT of PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS

GRIPE #1 - Understand the purpose of employee evaluations.

Performance Evaluations are a useful Fire Department management tool. I don't care if you are a full time paid agency, part time, or volunteer Department, this applies to you. Performance Evaluations can improve morale of employees who meet performance expectations, and provide fair warning to employees whose performance is unsatisfactory and where improvement is needed for them to meet standards. Performance evaluations are critical to a well run organization. Only a very few public organizations are subject to laws that require a performance evaluation be prepared for employees. Like the private sector, performance evaluations in most public sector organizations are optional. With this in mind, remember that even though they are an excellent management tool, if your organization is not committed to doing them correctly, then you will probably be better off without such a process. Ill prepared performance evaluations are worse than no performance evaluations at all. Poorly prepared or inaccurate evaluations can come back to haunt you in ways you never imagined, including discipline hearings, arbitration, grievance procedures or civil court downstream. Preparation of a performance evaluation is a task that you are charged with doing, and it is high risk in nature, and like any other high risk task, it needs special consideration. Again, the Five Pillars of success apply to Performance evaluations. If you want them done right, you need good people preparing them, a validated policy to show good people how to do them, training (initial and ongoing) to ensure good people know how to do them, supervision (this may mean management in this case) actively involved in the process, and when the process is not taken seriously, that needs to be addressed through the discipline process.

GRIPE #2 - Get a policy regarding evaluations.

As with any other high risk task, your Fire Department needs a policy as to how this process is done. The policy needs to be organization specific, and because of the high risk nature of the task, this policy needs to be reviewed by competent counsel on a regular basis. The purpose of any policy is to set standards and to maintain a consistent approach between multiple people who are doing the same task. Your organizational policy in this regard needs to be specific to each job description within the organization. Well prepared job descriptions, performance goals and expectations are an essential precursor to the evaluation process. These have to be identified well before any attempt can be made to evaluate performance. Additionally, observations by supervisors and managers of employee performance throughout the rating period need to be collected and saved via appropriate documentation. Your policy needs to include direction on how to analyze this data to establish a rating, and as much as possible, this portion of the process needs to be highly objective. The policy should include direction on how to gather necessary information from the rated employee and other sources, how to prepare the document,

and how to finalize the document. Finally, management review of the prepared document is essential, preferably before the document is reviewed and signed by the rated employee. This management review can include auditing the prepared document for accuracy, meeting with the rated employee, discussing their performance, looking for potential problem areas, and verifying level of knowledge regarding high risk, low frequency tasks they may face in their job description. This is also an excellent time to check for certificate and licensing validity, other certifications, and to see that the fire service employee resume is up to date.

GRIPE #3 - Select people to be Fire Service supervisors who are capable of being honest with employees.

Some performance evaluations are properly prepared. However, one of the biggest problems that permeates organizations throughout the country is that many performance evaluations exaggerate employee performance. This is true in the Fire Service also. To be sure, some supervisors use the process inappropriately to get even with people they do not like, but much more frequently, the performance evaluation overrates employees. Overrating occurs in two ways, intentionally and negligently. Overrating occurs for several reasons, but can be prevented by review of the process by informed managers. A lot of employees are overrated because supervisors lack the spine to be honest with the person they are rating. Some supervisors want to be a friend to everybody, some believe that rating people high will improve performance, some believe that they have to rate people as they have been rated before. Each and all of these reasons for overrating employees can cause you a lot of grief. With all of this in mind, when you are promoting people, make sure that one of the things you look for is the future ability to be honest with employees including during the rating process. Finally, ensure you have a training program for all supervisors and managers so that everyone understands what evaluations are about, the consequences of doing them wrong, and most importantly, how to do them properly. It is the right thing to do.

GRIPE #4 - The process should not be a secret.

After deriving a good policy and ensuring that you have good people doing the rating and reviewing of the evaluations, make sure that all employees are aware of how the process works including how data is collected and analyzed for use in the evaluation. Good people (and I assume you have them in the Fire Service) will rise and fall to your level of expectation. The evaluation process has to be explained in your employee guide so that they will know how their performance will be evaluated. Keeping the process secret (or creating the perception that it is secret) will only cause future problems including less than optimum performance and low morale. Additionally, when employees know each step of the process, they are better motivated to meeting the standards that you have set.

GRIPE #5 - Before you put pencil to paper, think.

As mentioned above, performance evaluations are a high risk task. However, they are also "discretionary time" in nature. This means you have a lot of time to think before you

perform the task. Use this time to review the policy of your organization and make sure you understand what you are doing. Develop an action plan as to how you are going to prepare this document. Further, utilize your discretionary time to read the last evaluations of the involved employee and if they had problem areas, or were given direction on areas needing improvement, check to see that the employee followed the recommended direction. Finally, use your discretionary time to analyze their performance during the rating period and to talk to other supervisors and get their input regarding this employee's performance. This discretionary time can be used to have a "pre-evaluation" discussion with the involved employee to discuss what you are doing, your preliminary data analysis and get their feedback and input regarding their specific performance. After you have done this and prepped a rough draft, you can use this discretionary time to check with your manager or even your personnel section and get their input into your efforts. As a management tool, this review by a manager may prevent some of the common errors made in the evaluation process. However, remember you are preparing the document, so weigh the comments of others with what your knowledge about the involved employee is.

GRIFE #6 - Be specific during the evaluation process.

Overrating (and underrating) employees can cause big time grief for you, the involved employee and the organization. Therefore, it is important for you to be specific. If you want to rate an employee as excellent, that is fine so long as you have SAF (**Specific, Articulate Facts**) to support the high rating. The same is true with rating an employee low. The specific, articulable facts are drawn from your personal observations, the observations of other supervisors, and other documentation generated during the rating period. Beware of some of the common "effects" that may alter your good clear thinking. These include the halo effect, the harsh and lenient effect, the central tendency effect, the similar to me effect, the first or last impression effect and the stereotype effect. Each of these effects can cloud the judgment of the evaluator, so recognize them and avoid them.

GRIFE #7 - Remember the importance of accuracy.

Accuracy is essential in a well prepared performance evaluation, particularly if the evaluation has negative elements that may impact future employment or promotion. The easiest way for an employee to challenge a negative review is to demonstrate that your specific, articulable facts are incorrect. This can be prevented by appropriate data collection and analysis during the evaluation process, and by a serious pre-evaluation discussion with the employee where you discuss with him/her your thoughts regarding their performance and allow them to respond as to the accuracy of your observations. The integrity of the process is dependent on accuracy and objectivity.

GRIFE #8 - Always proofread your documentation.

After preparing the document, and prior to taking it to your manager for her/his review, double check it again for accuracy. Minor errors can cause major problems, and your manager will hopefully be looking for these to prevent such problems. One common mistake on a free-form evaluation process is where the rater utilizes a word processor to

prepare the document. If you do so, please make sure you start with a blank screen so that there is no possibility that you will include elements from the last document you generated in this regard. Also, "canned" phrases taken from a "canned phrase data base" are easily recognizable and do not reflect well on you as the rater. Anyone can go to a master file of prepared phrases that have passed management scrutiny and "cut and paste" them into this "new" document. This is the lazy way and your employees and organization deserve better.

GRIFE #9 - If you're right, don't change it.

This is a very tough area, and can put you as the rater in a very awkward position. You prepare an honest evaluation, and you are directed by your boss (or your boss's boss) to change the ratings either up or down. Before you lock your heels in and lose your grip, analyze their request and utilize your discretionary time to think it over. They may be right, and you made a mistake. Or, they may be utilizing information that you were not aware of. (Aren't you glad you did not already have the document signed by the employee?). If the request is in good faith, and is a difference of opinion, then it may be in your best interest to follow their guidance. However, if the recommended change is wrong, and against the spirit of your policy, then you should make your feelings known. This is a personal call, and is dependent on the strength of your position relative to your boss, but if you change a document to reflect performance traits that you know did not exist, you may be setting yourself up for bigger problems downstream.

GRIFE #10 - Learn from and share your experiences.

As with any other task, the more you do it, the better you will get at it. As you learn, share your knowledge with your peers, and if your new found knowledge is not in the policy of your organization, make the appropriate recommendations to get the policy updated to reflect the better way to do evaluations. Finally, performance evaluations may well be the most important document you generate for your employees, so take the process seriously, and everyone will benefit.