

**WHAT PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL PROCESS  
WILL BE USED FOR PEACE OFFICERS IN  
MEDIUM SIZED AGENCIES IN THE YEAR 2005?**

**Article**

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## Sometime In The Future

“Thank you Lieutenant” she said as she drove off. The Lieutenant smiled and nodded kindly. Why? Because the ongoing evaluation process (OEP) was finally up and working. No, not in 2005 as hoped, in fact almost 10 years later due to encountering many challenges, but never mind that, they had all been overcome and OEP was here and it was by any measure, a tremendous success.

The Lieutenant knew that the moment she waved him to the side of the road to ask for directions, the audio and video feed streaming into the OEP main analysis computer from his electronic system monitors was allowing it to instantly evaluate and record both his and her behavior. As OEP verified the accuracy of the directions he gave her, analyzed both his and her voice inflections, and validated correlations between words and body language, it simultaneously updated his performance evaluation – along with his pay. It was as if his stock had just risen, quite literally, and he knew it. So did his supervisor, who saw the Lieutenant’s constantly updated performance appraisal streaming across the bottom of his computer screen like a stock ticker.

Yes it felt good to help someone. It felt good to get immediate, accurate feedback on performance. And it felt especially good to get paid for what he had contributed rather than just for being there. He was glad that the days of Union Vs. Management and concerns about “big Brother” were behind him and that every employee now came to work with the same goal in mind, to provide the absolute best public service possible – all the time.

Does the above scenario describe the current state of performance appraisals in your agency today? Certainly not, and it is probably not too likely to describe the state of performance appraisals in your agency's future either. It is simply but one example of an infinite number of possible future scenarios which can be developed by looking at an issue through the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) process. The intent result of this process is to develop positive future scenarios and then take whatever steps are within your control to create a desirable future for your agency.

### Why Write About Performance Appraisals?

Why apply the NGT process to performance appraisals? Police departments, like all agencies held accountable to the general public, have a long history of setting standards, modifying behavior, giving rewards, and documenting the performance of their officers through a formal performance appraisal process. Though this is true, the following observations exemplify that there is some inconsistency and dissatisfaction with the current methods used for police officer performance appraisal:

- In 1999, the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) mandated that during field training, every police officer in the State of California must have their performance, evaluated daily, in writing, on a POST – approved form. But after training, there are no POST requirements for performance appraisals at all. Yet;
- Over 28,000 matches were found on the Internet by entering the words, “performance evaluation”. Scanning a random number of those sites revealed that

they overwhelmingly dealt with the importance of, and necessity for, the completion of performance evaluations. For example;

- A U.S. Navy report stated that personnel evaluations are, “the single most important personnel management tool”. Yet;
- The Sacramento Police Department has abandoned the practice of performance appraisals altogether and no longer completes them on tenured officers at all. To date they report they have experienced no problems. However;
- The Los Angeles Police Department, in its recently released “Rampart Area Corruption Incident” report, offered the following assessment of its own performance appraisals:

“We must restore integrity to our performance evaluation system so that it can be relied upon as a true measure of performance. Whether that will require implementation of a new system, such as returning to outstanding, excellent or satisfactory categories and placing a numeric maximum on each category, or simply enforcing the existing rules is inconsequential. The fact is that our personnel evaluations have little or no credibility at any level in the organization and that must be corrected.” (Parks, 2000)

- Futures-oriented programs such as the POST Command College are suggesting a movement toward the Post-Industrial (or 21<sup>st</sup> Century) Collaborative Leadership Model. This model implies that future leaders should move away from the old style methods of commanding and controlling employees. Are written performance evaluations devices of management control? And Finally;
- Bill Brown summarized the current state of performance appraisals well in his Masters’ Thesis on police officer performance appraisals when he wrote:

“The general feeling is that their performance appraisals are not valid or reliable. More often than not, those feelings do represent the true state of affairs. Not because patrol officer performance cannot be assessed, but because little or no effort has been made to develop a performance evaluation instrument that is

capable of measuring patrol officer performance with a substantial degree of validity” (Brown, 1992)

These are among the points which I felt may signal a need to take a closer look at how and why police officers performance is appraised, and how that process might change in the future. It seems apparent that if law enforcement managers are truly committed to leading their officers into the challenges of the future using powerful collaborative leadership styles, they must examine whether it will it still be necessary to control and evaluate officer’s actions through a process as limited and confining as the performance evaluation. And they must ask whether current methods of appraising police officer performance be adequate in meeting the challenges of our rapidly changing times.

#### A Brief Historical Perspective

Why should police agencies performance appraisals at all? According to Bill Brown, there are six primary reasons that performance appraisals are done:

1. To motivate employees to improve performance
2. To assist employees in setting goals for professional development
3. To communicate management’s goals and objectives
4. To allocate organizational rewards
5. To make retainment or discharge decisions
6. To protect against liability

If performance appraisals are in fact intended to serve all of the important purposes listed above, why then does it seem many supervisors and officers alike are so indifferent to them? Brown suggests that this feeling may be widespread across many police

departments and that the root of the problem begins with the fact that the supervisors completing the appraisals have fallen victim to one of the seven common rating errors identified by experts. Those errors are:

**Halo/Horn Effect Errors:** This effect, first identified by Thorndike (1920) refers to the general impression that the supervisor has of a subordinate, be it good or bad (halo or horn, respectively) influencing the appraisal in a number of areas.

**Leniency/Severity Errors:** Leniency, the tendency for ratings to be higher than deserved, whereas severity is the tendency for ratings to be undeservedly harsh. Kingsbury (1933).

**Central Tendency Errors:** A general reluctance on the part of the rater to give higher or lower than average ratings. This is typically brought about by the requirement for increased levels of documentation by the rater who marks other than standard (Bernardin and Beatty 1984, 157-158).

**Similarity Errors:** The tendency on the part of the rater to award higher markings to those whom they believe to be similar to themselves (Bernardin and Beatty 1984, 162).

**Contrast Errors:** Blum and Naylor (1968, 39) The tendency of raters to give lower ratings to those who they see as being different from, and less capable than, themselves.

**Recency Errors:** The supervisor relies too heavily upon recent experiences with the subordinate. (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 1985).

**Factor Clarity errors:** This stems from an unclear understanding of the definitions of terms commonly used in the rating. For example, absent adequate explanation, what is “excellent” to one supervisor may be “standard” to another.

In addition, it appears that lack of training could contribute significantly to any one of the seven rating errors above. Again, Brown wrote, “Few organizations have given (performance appraisals) the attention (they) deserve. Performance appraisal can not be a simple one-hour-per-year undertaking”. In so writing, Brown was suggesting the need for additional ongoing training for raters, particularly in the area of recognizing and avoiding these common rating errors.

#### The Nominal Group Technique (NGT)

As previously mentioned, a major portion of this project was the facilitation of an NGT process. Given that ratings have largely been determined to be important, yet at the same time problematic, I turned to my NGT group for assistance in discussing what the future state of police officer performance appraisal might be, if they should continue to exist at all. The purpose of the NGT was to gather the collective opinions of a diverse group of participants as to how the future might impact police officer performance appraisal. The ten participants in this particular process included representatives from private industry, human resources, a cross-section of all levels of sworn and non-sworn police department employees, and police association legal counsel.

The panelists spent the day together discussing police officer performance appraisals and performing two basic tasks: 1) Identifying trends they have seen occurring that may have an impact upon this issue and, 2) Envisioning events which, should they occur could have an impact on this issue. At the end of the day, they had identified, discussed, and prioritized dozens of trends and events. The top three events identified by the panelists were:

1. Input from other sources  
Departments' tendency to seek and accept input from non-traditional sources such as subordinates, peers, supervisors and public, by a variety of means, including the Internet, and include that input in officers performance evaluations.

The panel believed the current trend is for more input to be sought and that this upward trend would continue.

2. Demand for documentation  
Officers' demands that their supervisors document specific evidence of behavior supporting supervisor's ratings of them.

The panel agreed that they have seen an increase in demands for documentation and saw no reason to believe that this trend would subside.

3. Litigation/challenges  
Officers willingness to challenge comments made about them in their performance evaluations through appeals, grievances, and litigation.

The panel had seen an increase in the tendency for officers to challenge comments made in their performance appraisals and felt this trend would continue.

The panelists felt that all of the above trends were increasing and would have an impact in some way upon police officer performance appraisal. They believed that all of these trends were more of a concern today than they had been a few years ago, and that they would continue to rise in concern. The group felt that each of these trends, if they continued to rise, would have a significant impact upon the issue.

The top three events selected by the panelists were:

1. Statewide mandated format  
POST – or another authoritative body, mandates that a specific form of performance evaluation must be used by the agency.

With this having already occurred for trainees, the panel envisioned that some authority, most likely POST, may mandate the use of a specific type of performance appraisal tool.

2. Sales and marketing section, customer driven  
The police department employs or creates a sales and marketing section which results in a new performance evaluation process focused exclusively on customer satisfaction.

One private sector member of the panel pointed out that there is virtually no private industry which succeeds without a marketing program. The panel agreed that the practice of marketing is rarely used in the public sector and that law enforcement agencies could benefit from making a concerted effort to more proactively publicize their efforts in a positive way.

3. Civilian review board gets involved in creating evaluations

The board actively participates in completing them on officers.

Panelists noted this has occurred in some jurisdictions already and that it could become a more widespread practice which could result in this event affecting any agency. This event would have a significant impact on performance appraisal.

The group collectively believed that the first two events had a significant (greater than 50%) likelihood of occurring sometime in the next ten years and that events one and three would have a negative impact upon the issue while event two, should it occur, would likely have a positive impact.

These trends and events, as well as others not shown, were used to develop several scenarios such as the one that began this article. As previously stated the purpose of the scenarios is to define a number of possible futures, both good and bad, in order to give leaders some direction as to how to act now. The theory is simply that that our actions today can have some potential impact upon, maybe even direct our future toward a more desirable one.

If leaders do decide to act now in order to attempt to affect the future of performance appraisals in their future, it is recommended that they follow a strategic plan for implementation.

### Strategic Plan

The strategic planning process is the phase where the agency defines, and begins to act in order to potentially alter its future. The strategic planning steps given below are

those recommended by Tom Estensen of Organizational Effectiveness Consulting.

Estensen suggests that before beginning the strategic planning process, planners should consider the following questions:

1. Why are we doing this?
2. What is our expected outcome?
3. What is our planning horizon?
4. How long should the process take?
5. Who should be involved?
6. What resources are available?
7. What should our process look like?

The agency may choose to form a volunteer committee of interested, and effected individuals representing a cross-section of all divisions, ranks, and points of view, to work together on the strategic planning process. The idea here is to get a lot of “fingerprints on the finished product”, a metaphor of Estensen’s intended to emphasize the importance of involving employees in the development process. This will ultimately develop a better, finished product as well as facilitate implementation after completion. Once selected, the group should proceed according to the following steps:

Define the future is the first step. This means the decision maker, having seen a need for a change in how performance evaluations are done, develops a focused vision of what needs to be accomplished and shares it with others. The more clearly this vision is communicated, the more likely the finished product is to be on target.

Assessment is next. The current state of the performance evaluations must be assessed from a variety of points of view. Both strengths and weaknesses should be listed

in order to ensure that what's working well with the current process remains, or is improved, and that what is not working is altered or eliminated.

External assessment occurs when the agency chooses to seek an external assessment from sources outside its own ranks – directly from its customers. How do those outside the agency view its current process? What changes would they like to see?

Stakeholder assessment, the agency identifies all sources, which are either affected by, or can potentially affect, the performance evaluation process. They need not be familiar with, or interested in, the process in order to be stakeholders. Many of those will not be members of the agency itself, but some will. Human resource personnel, attorneys, officers of all ranks and even the agency printer are among those likely to be effected by the outcome of the process.

Mission, Vision and Value Statements should be developed specifically for the committee, in a narrow context slimly tailored to define the desired outcome of the committee's efforts. Agency missions and vision statements should be taken into account, so they are not strayed from, but the mission, vision and value statements designed at this stage are for the express purpose of keeping the committee efforts focused and on track. The mission statement defines the work of the committee. The vision statement gives a snapshot of what they want to become. The value statement describes principles that guide attitudes, decisions and actions. The prominent posting of these defining statements may assist the committee in staying on course throughout its project.

Develop Key Strategies. The committee defines a number of specific steps that it will follow in order to accomplish its goal. This may be a point for the committee to

subdivide into smaller groups and work individually on these strategies, reporting on progress to the larger group at regular meetings.

## Conclusion

So, “What performance appraisal process will be used for peace officers in medium sized agencies in the year 2005”? Probably something very similar to what is used today. But that is very different from saying that they will not be improved.

I thought several interesting things occurred during the process of compiling this paper. First, I went into my NGT expecting to hear from the group that performance appraisals had outlived their need, that employees of all ranks were by and large not pleased with them, and that the future would likely see their elimination as police departments engaged in a more collaborative style of leadership where all members act more independently toward a desired group outcome. As you now know, this was not the case. The need for, and importance of, performance appraisals were reinforced by the group, along with a belief that their current state is less than satisfactory.

Second, as work began on a performance appraisal review committee at my agency, consensus was quickly reached that the group did not want to continue using the existing form. Yet it took several more meetings for the group to realize that the rating form itself was probably one of the factors least likely to affect the performance appraisal process, falling way behind the need for training and correction of common rating errors in order of priority for attention. Nevertheless, both groups reinforced that reviewing the performance appraisal process is both a necessary and important activity.

In closing, I would encourage law enforcement leaders to heed the words of Bill Brown and to provide supervisors with adequate training and oversight in completing performance appraisals. Likewise, they should also consider the words of Captain Ross Swope of the Metropolitan Police Department, Washington D.C. that “The major cause in the lack of integrity in American police officers is mediocrity” when examining their performance appraisal process, beginning with a careful, proactive look at whether mediocrity can be found in the way that the appraisals are currently being completed by supervisors and, if so, put an end to it immediately.

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