PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT ISSUANCE # 3

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Introduction: Human Resources Division is in the start-up phase of developing a central location for issuing communication to our customer base. This is the first issuance in a series of information that will be issued from this central location. The format will change to that of a HRD Newsletter, but the process has begun. This information is addressed to Managers and Supervisors to assist them in their on-going development in Performance Management.

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This is the third of a series of weekly communication you will receive until mid-November on Performance Management. The goal is to remind and inform you of key aspects of performance management: the rules, the process, your responsibilities, etc. – and to let you know where you can get further information. This issuance contains two skits that enhance the usefulness of this communication. Skit 1 examines a less-than-ideal way to conduct a performance review and Skit II exhibits how performance is assessed in some High-Performing Organizations. The skits are most instructive when acted out.

This communication highlights the responsibilities of the *Rating Official.*

This discusses one of the most difficult yet one of the most important parts of performance management – holding a meeting to discuss performance. At least three meetings must be held during the performance cycle:

- When the performance plan is established.
- At the Mid-Year Review.
- When the performance rating is given.

Also, two skits are attached which illustrate two variances of a performance meeting. The skits are best seen acted out by volunteers but reading them will also give you ideas on how to conduct a performance meeting. They were first acted out at the NASCOE Far West Rally earlier this year.

Tips for Managers and Supervisors who hold meetings to discuss performance:

First, plan for the meeting:

(1) Review all relevant documentation.

- Sample work products.
- Supervisor notes and memory joggers.
- Documentation from the performance planning meetings and/or mid-year performance review.
- Input from the employee, other supervisors, customers, or coworkers.

(2) Help the employee plan for the meeting. This ensures a productive, two-way conversation and that the employee will uphold his or her end of the performance management partnership.

- Agree on a specific time and place for the discussion.
- Explain the meeting's purpose and summarize the topics you plan to discuss.
- Give the employee a copy of any draft performance plan you may have developed. Emphasize that it is a work-in-progress that you will accurately build together in the meeting and that changes can be made. Give the employee a copy of any supporting documentation you used.
- Ask the employee to think about his or her areas of strength and areas for development and to gather work samples that support his or her performance.

(3) Set the climate:

- Redirect incoming phone calls and turn off any cell phones or pagers to avoid interruptions during the meeting.
- Try to position yourself in relation to the employee so as not to suggest superiority.
- Remove any physical barriers (e.g., office equipment, computer hardware, or stacks of items) between you and the employee. It should be clear that the employee is the focus of your attention.
- A private office (other than your own) or a conference room is an ideal place to hold the meeting. It should have a door that can be closed so conversations cannot be easily heard outside of the room.
- Hold the meeting in "neutral territory" and provide a comfortable environment. Let people know that you will not be available for telephone calls, etc., during the

time of the meeting. Posting some type of "do not disturb" sign will also help prevent interruptions.

Second, conduct the meeting:

Your goal is to establish a relaxed, nonthreatening environment in which the employee feels secure and respected. You should:

(1) Consider cultural differences regarding:

- Eye contact
- Personal proximity
- Nonverbal behaviors

(2) Establish a positive tone for the discussion by greeting the employee and welcoming him or her to the discussion.

(3) Review the meeting objectives. Make sure you are both clear about the general content and goals of the meeting.

- Discuss how the employee's performance compares with performance-plan expectations and the resulting ratings for each element. Share supporting documentation.
- Communicate the summary rating.
- Identify developmental opportunities that will improve the employee's performance or help him or her continue to grow

Finally, close the meeting:

- Summarize what has been discussed and agreed to (or ask the employee to summarize); ask for more input.
- Confirm follow-up activities, such as providing a copy of any documentation and forwarding documents to the reviewing official for approval.
- Express your commitment to the employee's growth and success; ensure that all the employee's concerns have been addressed.

By all working together, we can make a success of our performance management program.

Handbook 5-PM, "Performance Management and Awards Program", has been updated and is now available at: ftp://ftp.fsa.usda.gov/manuals/5-pm_r11_a01.pdf. This handbook contains complete, up-to-date details on all aspects of the performance management and awards program. Additional information is available on the HR website at: http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/hrdapp?area=home&subject=erpm&topic=prm.

Narrator's Script

Narrator: Good afternoon! My name is Stephen Crisp and I'm the FSA Performance Management Program Manager. Over the next half-hour, you will be viewing a couple of "skits" portraying situations intended to exemplify both how to, and how NOT to, conduct a performance review. One would think that showing a good and a bad example should not be necessary considering how critical performance management is in ANY organization. In ANY organization, it is reasonable to expect that all supervisors would strive to carry out their supervisory and managerial responsibility in accordance with the tenets that govern performance management. The reality is much too often, they do not. The first skit you will be viewing illustrates a situation that, unfortunately, occurs more often than we are ready to admit. As you watch, keep in mind that, when performance reviews are conducted, the supervisor is supposed to cover the performance measures that will be used to gauge the employee's accomplishments; for example, with regard to quality, quantity, timeliness, and ANY other performance measure to be used. Does this happen in the skits we are about to see? Hmm...let's watch...

Skit I

(Purpose: to show a less-than-ideal way to conduct a performance review)

Scene One

Setting: The setting is a typical supervisor's office equipped with the usual furniture and amenities (i.e., a desk, credenza, supervisor's chair, desk-top computer system, phone, a couple of chairs—maybe even a small table—for visitors, U.S. flag, etc.)

[The setting for Skit I, Scene One. Mark (CED) is sitting at his desk looking at his Outlook calendar. He turns slowly around, opens a desk drawer, retrieves a folder with Joan's (PT) performance plan, and scans the document furtively; i.e., shuffles through the pages spending no more than a second or two on each.]

Mark: *[Turns to his phone, depresses the speakerphone key, and dials a number. The phone can be heard ringing and a person answering at the other end.]*

Joan: *[Joan's voice is heard over the speakerphone]* "This is Joan."

Mark: "Hello, Joan. This is Mark."

Joan: *[Joan's voice]* "Good morning, Mark."

Mark: "Joan, it's time for that experience called performance review and, distasteful as it may be, there's no way getting around it. If you can get away from what you're doing for the next 30 minutes or so we can get it out of the way." Can you?

Joan: *[Joan's voice]* "Can I what!"

Mark: "...get away from what you're doing right now."

Joan: *[Joan's voice] (utters a sigh)* "(in a tone reflecting obvious dismay) Ok... I'll be right there."

Scene Two

Setting: The setting is the same as that for Scene One. Mark is sitting behind his desk pretending to be reviewing some documents.

Joan: *[Arrives at Mark's office and stops at the threshold.]*

Mark: *[Sees Joan at his threshold]* "Come in and have a seat, Joan. *[He begins to speak as Joan is sitting]* Did you know that survey after survey has revealed that doing performance reviews is the chore that supervisors find most distasteful?"

Joan: "Yeah. I believe I've heard you say that before…every year about this time, as a matter of fact."

Mark: "That's because it is true! ...but enough pointless chatter. Listen, I don't want to belabor this more than I have to. What I will do is go through each of the elements telling you how you're doing and giving you the "highlights" of my reasons for giving you that assessment. Keep in mind that I had to apply the standards quite strictly because upper management allows us to give only so many outstanding ratings at the end of the year." *[Picks up a copy of Joan's performance plan and stretches his arm over his desk to hand it to her. She gets up from her chair and reaches for it.]*

Joan: *[As she is getting back in her chair]* "I don't know why we have to go through the same exercise every year, Mark."

Mark: "Well, Joan, as I said at the beginning, we are required to do this."

Joan: *[With veiled impatience]* "I'm not talking about that, Mark!. I know we have to have at least one performance review every year!"

Mark: *[With noticeable exasperation]* "What are you talking about, then!"

Joan: *[Impatiently]* "Mark, every year you begin by telling me how distasteful the process is and how you can assign only so many outstanding ratings. ...And I know better. You're just setting me up for another fully successful rating."

Mark: "I'm sorry you feel that way but I don't set people up. They set themselves up through their performance. I only call it like it is."

Joan: *[Sighs]* "Alright, Mark. Call it like it is and let's get this over with."

Mark: *[Avoiding eye contact with Joan, begins to read from the copy in his hands. Joan rolls her eyes as he reads]* "Ok, then. Let's start with the first critical element: Communications. Let me read you the definition for this element. It reads... 'Oral and written communications are clear, correct, timely, and presented in an understandable manner. Supervisor and coworkers are informed of issues and problems when necessary. Information and guidance provided is timely and correct.' If you look at the benchmarks you'll see that you are barely 'squeezing by' at Fully Successful. I seem to recall having to review several of your products more than once...which in and of itself implies that you needed more than minimal supervision on this. Your products were also late...not always but sometimes, anyway. Besides, I also recall having some issues with the clarity and accuracy of the information you presented on a couple of documents. While I also had issues with points for supporting policy goals a time or two, I chose to make the adjustments myself and leave it at that. But...let's not get into that. There is no purpose in "beating a dead horse." Again, I assess you at the fully successful level but had to overlook a couple of things to get you there."

Joan: *[Despondently]* "Ok, Mark. Whatever...."

Mark: *[Still avoiding eye contact]* "Ok, then. Let's go on to the next element."

Narrator: Perhaps it would be unfair to start by asking, "What went wrong here?" We would merely be inviting an answer like, "Everything...everything went wrong!" This skit has so many things worthy of discussion. What do you think?

(after discussion)

Let's recap.

1. Mark begins by putting down the process with a condescending introduction. He refers to the review process as "distasteful" and implies he would rather get around it and not do it. "...so we can get it out of the way," he says. Why do you think he is doing this? What is he hoping to achieve? Is he hoping the employee will let him off easy by saying, "I hate it too, boss. I, too, think the whole process is a farce. Just give me whatever assessment you want and let's get it over with?" Now...really...is that how employees react? No, they don't! They feel that they toiled too hard during the year and expect their accomplishments to be acknowledged and measured properly. They want a fair assessment that demonstrates with supportable evidence "why they received the assessment they did."
2. There was no meeting set beforehand. Joan gets a call "out of the blue" asking if she has "30 minutes or so" and is hardly prepared to discuss performance. Do you suppose the supervisor planned it that way? Maybe!...but...why? So that Joan was unprepared to respond to the shortcomings pointed out?
3. Now...his ensuing remarks have every bit the make-up of a classic set-up. He uses terminology like "...assessment I have assigned you..." as opposed to "...assessment you have earned". He is prepared to give Joan the "highlights" of his reasoning, and points out he is applying the standards "strictly" because only so many "Outstandings" are allowed. Ask yourselves for a moment, "What message is he sending?" How about, " I hate this process because it's bogus and I'm going to give you a fully satisfactory rating although you probably deserve more." Lovely! (sarcastically)
4. Is this the first time Mark does this? Not according to the exchange between Joan and Mark. Joan points out that he has done it over several years. The result? Mark has zero credibility with Joan.
5. When he finally gets to reviewing her performance, he uses language such as "I seem to recall," and "not always but sometimes" reflecting that he does not have solid information to back his assessment. Therefore, his strategy is to create the notion that he is "cutting her some slack" to get her to the fully successful level.
6. What should Mark have done? Evaluate Joan fairly, assign her the assessment she earned.
1. Now...in this instance, is the performance process being used to promote and measure good performance? Probably not. Is it being used to meet a requirement that employees have a performance review? Probably "Yes." Will it lead to a meaningful performance review session at the end of the rating period? Who knows! Will it meet the tenets of good performance management? Not a chance!

What about Joan? Does she have any responsibility in this process? Could SHE have done anything to make this a more beneficial interaction?

1. Yes, she does...and, yes, she could! When Joan received her performance review, she could have shown an interest and asked to meet at a later time to go over the review and Mark's expectations. She could have said something like, "Mark, it's obvious you have important matters to attend to. However, I want to clearly understand your expectations. Can we schedule a meeting to go over my performance review at a later time...say...next week?"

Is it fair to expect Joan to do this? For her own sake...Yes! It's just as important for employees to take initiative in this process as it is for the supervisor. Employees have a responsibility to review and understand their performance review and the expectations placed upon them. Joan just tucked the performance review away with an apparent "Out of sight...Out of mind" mentality.

Narrator [moving on]: Let's take a look at "the Good", a skit that exemplifies how a performance assessment should occur.

Skit II

(Purpose: to show how performance is assessed in some High-Performing Organizations)

Scene One

Setting: The setting is a typical supervisor's office equipped with the usual furniture and amenities (i.e., a desk, credenza, supervisor's chair, desk-top computer system, phone, a chair or two for visitors, U.S. flag, etc.)

PT (Bob):

[Seems to be reading a document. Looks at his watch, turns towards his desk phone, depresses the speakerphone key, and dials a number. The phone can be heard ringing and a person answering at the other end.]

CED (Mary):

[Mary's voice is heard over the speakerphone] "This is Mary."

Bob: "Hello, Mary. This is Bob. Is our meeting still on?"

Mary: *[Mary's voice]* "Yes, it is, Bob. I have all the materials I'll need on my desk and we can get started as soon as you get here."

Bob: "I'm on my way." *[Hangs up the receiver.]*

Scene Two

Setting: The setting is a typical supervisor's office equipped with the usual furniture and amenities (i.e., a desk, credenza, supervisor's chair, desk-top computer system, phone, a couple of chairs—AND a small coffee table—for visitors, U.S. flag, etc.). Mary seems absorbed perusing Bob's performance review. She smiles as she highlights items on one of the pages. Bob breaks her concentration as he arrives at her threshold.

Bob: "Hi, Mary. I'm here! By the way, how are you this morning?"

Mary: Oh, Hi, Bob! I'm fine. Please come in...*[Pointing at the seats in front of the coffee table]*...have a seat.

Bob: "Thank you Mary. I'm so glad we did not have to reschedule because I have a trip coming up and would like to know how we are doing before I leave.

Mary: "I love that attitude! Let's get started then!" *[Gets up from her chair, comes around her desk, and sits at the coffee table in the chair not occupied by Bob.]* "I'm going to go over your performance accomplishments element by element. Let's start by discussing the Communications element. It reads... 'Oral and written communications are clear, correct, timely, and presented in an understandable manner. Supervisor and coworkers are informed of issues and problems when necessary. Information and guidance provided is timely and correct.' Now...when we discussed your performance

plan you may recall I mentioned your ability to communicate effectively and persuasively would be of paramount importance. Let's take a look at how you're doing.

I have received 26 e-mails or telephone calls from producers commending your treatment of them and recommending you for recognition. Also, I continually receive positive comments from your coworkers on how you always accurately and time share program information. ...But perhaps your greatest accomplishment came when you drafted that decision memo which was deemed of such high quality and applicability, the State Executive Director was able to persuade the Administrator to get us $5 million in Program funding and the promise of another slot!

Bob, generally, these examples alone would go a long way towards earning you a rating of "Exceeds" on this element. However, there is a critical piece where things have not gone as well that has compelled me to instead consider a rating of "Fully Successful". You were tasked with preparing a technical manual for training new staff on working with the Conservation Program. That manual is long overdue. It was supposed to be ready when the last hiring wave was completed and that was over two months ago.

Bob: **"**Actually, Mary, I completed the manual two weeks ahead of schedule. However, it required vetting by another office and we have not been successful in getting it back. Apparently, the person to whom it was assigned has been on other priority projects for several months. I have been checking every week and learned that he will complete the other projects soon. He promised to give our project priority and clear it in the next week or so. In retrospect, I should have kept you abreast but I made the call that you were too busy to bother with these things."

Mary: Now I am a bit embarrassed. I should have known it is not like you to ignore something this important. Do let me know the next time...and you have definitely earned an "Exceeds" in this element. Any reaction?

Bob: **"**Well...I believe deeply in what we do and work hard at seizing every opportunity to further our mission. If there is any training I should take to further my development, I'm all ears. That said, I am still somewhat humbled by your assessment."

Mary: "There is no need to be! You really earned it. Let's move on to the next element.

Narrator: How did Bob's performance review go? It went quite well didn't it!? Mary and Bob both did a great job in participating in this process, and both were very prepared. What do you think?

(after discussion)

Let's first look at the setting:

1. a meeting was scheduled to conduct the performance review;
2. both parties are prepared; and
3. the setting is inviting and amicable.
4. Mary is cordial in her demeanor and joins Paul at the coffee table avoiding a "from-behind-the-desk" discussion.

Let's take a closer look at how Bob conducted himself.

1. He displays a great attitude: he is glad the meeting was not cancelled.
2. He shows great interest in his work. He indicates he wants to learn from the meeting to, if needed, "make adjustments" or take some training through AgLearn, or change approaches in an upcoming undertaking.
3. When given less-then-positive feedback about the technical manual, he remained courteous and very professional.
4. Instead of contesting Mary's assessment, he provides information that demonstrates that, even in this instance, his performance is "above the cut."

Now, let's discuss how Mary did.

1. She immediately begins by dispensing acknowledgement. "I love that positive, earnest attitude," she says before she begins discussing the competency's definition.
2. She then moves on to cite Bob's noteworthy accomplishments exalting the noteworthy and superior nature of his work.
3. She is thorough in her explanations, skillfully embedding praise in her description of the supporting evidence. She accomplishes this by highlighting the benefits of the outcomes.
4. She acknowledges she misjudged Bob on the technical manual issue and expresses her embarrassment.
5. What does she get in return? ...an even greater commitment from an already dedicated employee who is "humbled" by her assessment.

As we've learned from the previous scenario, this meeting could have played out quite differently couldn't it? What if Bob had said, "Wait a minute, Mary! You're blaming me for something not under my control! YET, THERE ARE TIMES WHEN SUPERVISORS DO NOT RECOGNIZE IN THEIR ASSESSMENTS WHY A PROJECT DIDN'T HAPPEN ON TIME. But that didn't happen, did it. That's because good communication skills, pre-planning, and mutual respect are important ingredients in conducting a successful performance review meeting.

One cannot overemphasize how important it is for employees to understand their performance plan...the objectives behind each element...the expectations being levied on the employee to achieve those objectives.... A performance plan is of little use if the employee doesn't understand it or doesn't make an effort to follow it, don't you agree? Bob and Mary did all the things that

need to be done to ensure a common understanding of the expectations, and Bob is motivated to achieve or exceed them.

Employees should have at a minimum a 6 month performance review. Better would be a review every quarter. Supervisors should schedule these meetings a few days in advance. If the supervisor does not schedule a quarterly or mid-year review meeting, employees should take the initiative and schedule a meeting with their supervisor. Each time a performance review is conducted, the employee should note on the performance plan that a review has been conducted.

I trust the scenarios posed in these skits have been helpful whether you are a supervisory or non-supervisory employee. And remember! The key is to approach the process with integrity keeping in perspective its basic objective: to help employees be better performers. Good luck!