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Reinvigorating Performance Evaluation: First Steps in a Local Health Department

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE TEAM

Evaluating employee performance is a valuable human resource tool and an essential element of the functioning of a local health department. Evaluations are a motivational tool for health department managers to communicate performance expectations to employees and provide them with feedback. The performance evaluation process also indicates areas where an employee needs to improve and provides direction for training and professional development activities. This process can also identify opportunities for recognition, positive reinforcement, and improvement in the department's work environment (Chandra, 2006; Kalb, et al., 2006).

Despite the numerous positive outcomes that the performance evaluation supports, implementation faces multiple challenges. Employee evaluations often carry a negative connotation for workers and supervisors alike. Standardized evaluation forms may appear to lack relevance to the job duties and/or performance of an individual. Evaluation criteria may seem unclear and subjective. Performance evaluation processes may suffer from design flaws such as the use of personality traits or vague qualities as the basis for the evaluation. These factors tend to insert subjectivity into a process that should be based on objective observations and measurements to the degree

Key Findings

- Performance evaluation is a valuable aid in improving employee job satisfaction and retention.
 - Commonly used performance evaluation terms should be defined.
 - Employee participation in the creation of standards and duty statements enhances acceptance.
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possible (Einstein & LeMere-LaBonte, 1989; McConnell, 2003).

The field of human resource management contains a substantial body of literature concerning best approaches to performance evaluations. This literature suggests that many of the challenges described above can be overcome through adherence to a core set of best practices. In addition, local implementations may need a broad, flexible framework to explicitly support prescribed components and goals of performance evaluation. This report describes current efforts of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH) to improve the performance evaluation process for its employees.



Current Performance Evaluation Process

Los Angeles County's estimated population of 10,363,850 as of January 2008 is the largest of any county in the United States, and is exceeded by only eight states (State of California, Department of Finance, 2008). County government in Los Angeles County is the largest employer in a five-county region, employing approximately 106,800 people in 39 departments (L. McClough, personal communication, October 22, 2008). The LACDPH employs approximately 4,000 of these workers.

All County departments use a standard annual employee performance form, which is completed by the employee's supervisor. The report is prepared using a common form for all classifications of represented employees and most non-represented employees.

Performance is rated in six areas: quantity, quality, work habits, personal relations, adaptability, and other. Supervisory performance is also rated for all supervisors. The evaluation concludes with an overall rating of either "outstanding," "very good," "competent," "needs improvement," or "unsatisfactory." "Competent" is considered the minimum level of performance expected of a trained and qualified employee (Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, 2007).

At the county level, the Department of Human Resources is in the beginning stages of a performance management project that will convert the current paper-based performance evaluation process into a web-based format. The content will be expanded to include a performance work plan that links essential duties with performance expectations as well as the goals of each Department's strategic plan. The performance expectations will delineate the quality, quantity, time, and manner of performance of the essential duties of a given position. Some expected business practices, such as the use of appropriate safeguards for data, will be the same for all employees.

Building Blocks of a New Approach

An effective and fair performance evaluation process is based on key building blocks that include an agreed-upon set of competencies, accurate duty statements, and consistent standards of practice. In anticipation of the County-wide revision of the performance evaluation process, the Department of Public Health defined four terms that are commonly used in discussions of performance evaluation, often without agreement on their meanings (Table 1). The terms are not mutually exclusive and overlap with each other. **Competencies** are described as sets, not individual items. **Standards** are more specific than competencies and describe the acceptable level of performance of a given set of duties. **Class specifications** are the official civil service definitions of the minimum requirements for a given position. **Duty statements** are a list of the tasks or areas of work for a given position.

The department recognizes that a performance evaluation reflects various dimensions of the employee experience. For some, the evaluation focuses on adherence to standard business practices, such as arriving at work on time. For others, the emphasis may be on competence in a particular profession. Finally, some are evaluated in terms of productivity or adherence to work standards in relation to a particular mission.

In light of these perspectives, the department has identified three distinct components of performance evaluation. These include *business practices*, *competencies*, and *standards*. The relationship of the three components to the overall process of the evaluation are displayed in a flow sheet format in Figure 1.

Business Practices Component

The business practices component describes the work behaviors expected of any county employee. Examples of business practices include performing one's job in a safe

manner and protecting computer password security. These practices are linked to existing departmental policies and procedures. Employees will be rated on them on a yes/no or pass/fail basis.

Competencies Component

A competent workforce is an essential component of an effective public health system (Institute of Medicine, 2002). Competency is the application of knowledge and skills necessary for the practice role. Competencies can also be described as a set of complementary skills, knowledge, and attitudes that enable an employee to perform work related to the mission of the organization (Table 1).

For a local health department, competencies should be based on national, state, and local consensus about the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to fulfill key job responsibilities. This set of competencies should be further refined to apply to specific professions. Self-assessment and supervisor assessments of employee competence against an agreed-upon set of competencies for a particular profession provide the information needed to make a joint plan for the professional growth and development of the employee. An understanding of the competencies expected at each level of practice will lead easily to the creation of role-specific duty statements (what is expected) and objective standards (how to meet the expectations) that represent competent practice (Rarick & Baxter, 1986).

The development of profession-specific competencies starts with a public health worker core competency document developed by the LACDPH. This core document incorporates the work of the Council on Linkages between Academia and Public Health Practice and includes consideration of the Council's May 2008 draft revisions of the Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals (Council on Linkages Between Academic and Public Health Practice, 2001).

The LACDPH document includes additional sets of competencies related to leadership, ethics, emergency preparedness and others that are department-specific. While the Council on Linkages focuses on the mid-tier public health worker, the LACDPH document applies to all employees. This document is in the final stages of revision. Once completed, four of the professions within LACDPH (nursing, public health investigation, health education, and dentistry) will create profession-specific versions of the competencies document. A supervisor assessment and the employee's self-assessment of competencies will be linked with individual performance evaluation. Based on these assessments, the supervisor and employee will collaborate to set the employee's goals for skill, knowledge, and attitude development or enhancement for the coming year.

Standards Component

The third component in the evaluation process is standards of practice. Standards of practice are essential to reducing subjectivity in the performance evaluation process. They should be as quantifiable as possible and evaluate a particular level of skill or the application of knowledge in the context of a given public health program or unit within the Department. Supervisors can then be provided with the tools needed to measure employee adherence to the standards. The participation of employees in the formulation of their role-specific duty statements and standards of practice will increase their acceptance of the performance evaluation process (Kalb, et al., 2006; Bowman, 1999). Evaluating employees based on their adherence to standards of practice helps to ensure that all employees are working in support of the health department's mission.

A well-defined duty statement that is role-specific is the starting point for the development of standards of practice. A role-specific duty statement is created by expanding and adding more detail to a generic duty statement.

For instance, a generic public health nursing duty is stated as “ensures that target population understands the desired outcome as it relates to the health education and anticipatory guidance provided by the public health nurse.” A role-specific version of this duty for a maternal and child health public health nurse would be “ensures that women enrolled in case management in southeastern Los Angeles County understand the desired outcomes related to the health education and anticipatory guidance provided by the public health nurse.”

The task of creating these duty statements within a large local health department may seem daunting. For example, within LACDPH, the largest profession is nursing with approximately 847 employees serving in 127 different roles. Public health investigators include about 100 employees with 21 roles. Health education has 71 employees with 37 roles. Physicians number 73 with 39 roles. The task of creating the role-specific duty statements is underway. These statements will also include emergency preparedness and response duties for each profession. Once the duty statements are completed, work on updating the standards of practice and the revision of the class specifications will begin.

Conclusion

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health is committed to improving the public’s health. The continued development of its employees is critical to this effort. A reinvigorated employee performance evaluation process will emphasize the contribution of employees to overall organizational goals in a continuing cycle of improvement. An effective performance evaluation process in the Department will lead to greater employee and supervisor satisfaction, an improved work environment, a retained and productive employee, and greater alignment of work effort to mission (Einstein & LeMere-LaBonte, 1989; Thomas & Bretz, 1994).

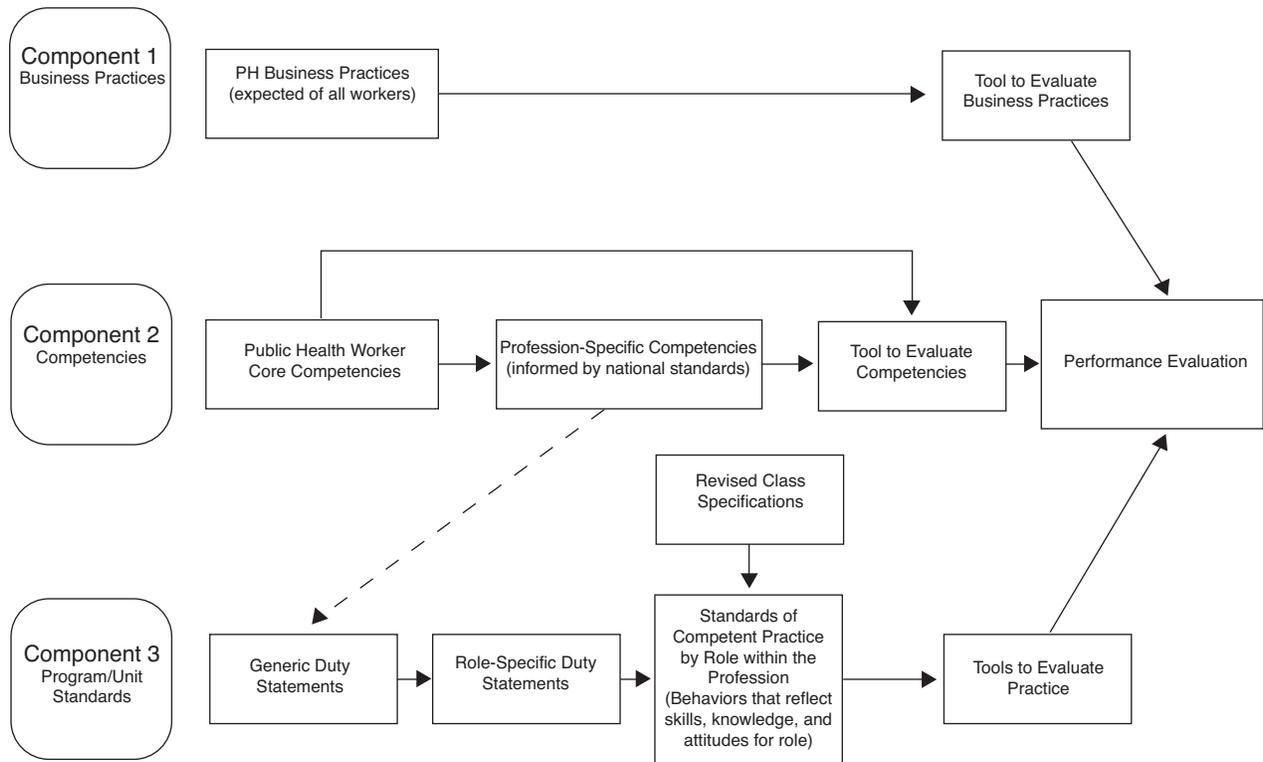
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Table 1. Performance Evaluation-Related Definitions

<i>Competency (Set)</i>	<i>Standard</i>	<i>Class Specification</i>	<i>Duty Statement</i>
<p>A set of complementary skills, knowledge, and attitudes that enable a Los Angeles County Public Health employee to perform work related to the Essential Services of Public Health. The level of competency expected of individual employees is determined by their profession, their supervisor/management role, and their unit's responsibilities within the Department of Public Health.</p> <p>Based on national guidelines from a professional organization (if available) and clinical practice guidelines</p> <p>Use:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • guide professional development opportunities • incorporate into a competency-based performance evaluation process. • guide the creation/revision of a class specification 	<p>A description of a competent level of performance for a particular employee duty. Each standard includes measurement criteria. For a standard to be met, all the listed criteria must be met. A standard remains relatively stable over time, but measurement criteria may be revised more frequently to reflect advancement in scientific knowledge and practice expectations. A standard says what is to be performed and how it is to be performed.</p> <p>Based on national guidelines from a professional organization if available and clinical practice guidelines</p> <p>Use:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluate employees • orient new employee • create class specifications and duty statements 	<p>The official document that sets forth the title, definition, standards, typical duties, and minimum requirements for each class in the County classified service. It provides for a description of the class as a whole with six major elements: title, definition, standards, duties, minimum requirements, physical group. It describes the minimum knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform a specific job. Any unusual physical requirements are also listed.</p> <p>Based on competencies and standards</p> <p>Use:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • define a class sufficiently to provide standards for allocation • provide specific information to management and prospective employees on the roles, capabilities, and qualifications of a job class 	<p>A brief and clear listing of the essential features of the work being performed. A duty is a set of tasks performed to a standard. The first word of each duty is an active verb that emphasizes the function (e.g., supervise, provide, determine, record). Words are used to provide a picture of the actual responsibilities of the position. A duty statement says what is to be performed, not how it is to be performed. Duties are listed in order of importance. Organizational and reporting relationships are described or shown.</p> <p>Based on the class specification</p> <p>Use:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • orient new employees • create new positions • recruit for vacant positions • justify a new position • clarify for each employee what specific duties are expected in her/his current assignment in a specific position

Figure 1 Components of Performance Evaluation



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