



Guest Column

BY LT. PAUL HASENMEIER,
HURON (OHIO) FIRE
DEPARTMENT

Evaluation Strategies for Fire Service Mentors, Instructors and Officers

If I walked into the classroom and said, “I am glad some of you showed up. My name is Paul Hasenmeier and I am a firefighter/paramedic and newly promoted lieutenant who is going to teach you everything you need to know about evaluating,” you might wonder what experience I have evaluating employees. Not much really, but I did read the book sitting on your shelf left, unread by you.

Your evaluation of me as an instructor would most likely be shattered by me not meeting your expectations, even in the first minutes of the presentation. Those expectations are preconceived thoughts and ideals based on your previous experiences. In retrospect, if I were to begin the presentation looking sharp, professional, and able to relate to you, your evaluation of me would most likely receive higher marks.

The processes of evaluating probationary employees, seasoned veterans and students are different in their own right. However, through regular evaluation, positive developmental achievement can be reached in any organization. No matter who you are evaluating, whether it be a student, rookie or seasoned veteran:

- maintain a positive attitude;
- use the methods of evaluation;
- you must remain objective;
- understand the difficulties you may encounter; and
- prohibit evaluation errors.

The evaluation process is not meant to be a negative one, but we often find ourselves just as stressed before and during, due to little training, fear of a lawsuit or being afraid to do the right thing. We can turn the negative perceptions into a positive performance process by using some easy terms—associate in place of subordinate; attributes in place of strengths; objectives in place of weakness; and focusing on the positives/value each person has even though those may be difficult to find in some people.

If we are truly trying to develop great employees, regular evaluations are necessary to commend progress and nip problems in the bud. Keep in mind, though, that observations you make regarding one’s on-duty performance may be directly related to that person’s off-duty behaviour, at which time it is your business to step in and help. Examples include family death, money issues, and substance addiction.

EVALUATING

As an evaluator, you will encounter four types of people. First are your stars, who have a high level of job knowledge and maturity. Second are your troublemakers, who have a high level of job knowledge, but low maturity. These people will be your biggest challenge when trying to turn behaviour to what is expected. Third are your people who have a low job knowledge, but high maturity. Increase their training and performance

will improve. Lastly are your rookies who have a low job knowledge and maturity. Training, direction and time will shape these new Fire Service professionals.

The misconception that many of us have is that evaluations are used as a disciplinarian. This stereotype is wrong and should be excluded in all aspects of evaluation, because we are trying to improve performance through this process. We all make mistakes, which is okay as long as we learn from them. Now, if the same mistake is made over and over, that is poor performance which needs addressed. Through the evaluation process we can work to help the person improve to the required level of expectation.

Remaining objective during the evaluation process is difficult, but not impossible. We often base what a firefighter is supposed to do from what is written in their job description. Although okay, job descriptions are often very general without specific expectations. I suggest having each member of your organization contribute some expectations that should be met by everyone (for example working hard, keeping a clear head, etc.) and then holding each other accountable.

Whether probationary, part-time, or full-time employees, they need to know what we, as supervisors and evaluators, expect. Tell them and help them improve skills, knowledge, aptitude, and attributes. Some of the more difficult items to improve will be common

sense, situational awareness, and “street smarts”. Can we teach the last three? We absolutely can through persistent teaching and direction.

The methods of evaluating include supervisor appraisals (which are the most traditional), self appraisals, peer appraisals, subordinate appraisal (which may just give you a good evaluation for fear of retribution), outside appraisals (which may be done by individuals with no knowledge of your organization, and will be costly), and combined appraisals (which use the supervisor and self appraisals to determine performance levels).

Now, pull out your organization’s evaluation form and look at how it’s laid out, what categories you evaluate, and my favourite, how the scoring is tabulated. Some forms use scoring from 1 to 5, while others use 1 to 10 with the highest number being the highest score. What level of performance is a 3 or a 7? It is the evaluator’s opinion, which is subjective and what we are trying to avoid. If we use a scoring scale of 0-1-2, with 0 representing does not meet expectations, 1 representing meets expectations, and 2 representing exceeds expectations, we can really place importance on where improvement is needed. On this type of scale the evaluator is required to document and provide details as to why a person does not meet or exceeds expectations.

Evaluations should not be a surprise for you or the employee. Keep track of

significant events in a file or on post-it-notes, good or bad, throughout the evaluation period whether it be annual or semi-annual. This documentation will help keep you objective and give you examples to back up your evaluation of an employee.

DIFFICULTIES EVALUATING

By recognizing the difficulties you may encounter with evaluating, you will be more prepared and cognizant of how to make the process a positive step in the performance improvement process.

ERRORS WHEN EVALUATING

Errors during the evaluation process should be avoided. You must first understand them and then avoid them, which will help you remain objective, consistent and fair.

Deficiency Error – An employee may be deficient in one area, but you score them deficient in all areas.

Contamination Error – You were told something bad about the employee just prior to the evaluation.

Halo Error – You apply the perception of one aspect across the entire evaluation, may be good or bad.

Lenient or Hard Error – Lenient reduces conflict, hard is a common error of new supervisors (does not meet expectations).

Bias Error – Your personal bias should not cloud the evaluation.

Recency Error – Evaluating based off of recent events and not the entire evaluation period.

Average Score Error – Rating the employee in the middle of the scale for all categories.

Comparing Error – Only one employee would receive a good evaluation.

Frame Reference Error – Inconsistency between supervisors based on personal standards.

CONCLUSION

Fire Service mentors, instructors and officers must be proud of the people they are developing. Never forget to give feedback during training, after incidents and even during daily activities. You, your firefighters, and your organization will benefit as performance improves. The next generation of fires and gun shot wounds will be handled by the exemplary professional performance of those we evaluate, coach, and counsel. Be safe! ◀◀

Lieutenant Paul Hasenmeier has been a firefighter since 2000 for the City of Huron (OH) Fire Division. He is a paramedic, fire inspector, SCUBA diver, and an instructor. He has an associate’s degree in fire science, has gained knowledge in numerous technical rescue disciplines, and is a member of Ohio’s Region 1 USAR team. He can be reached at phas@bex.net or www.criticalrescuetraining.com



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