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Laying the Groundwork: Implementing a New Personnel Evaluation System

Abstract

The University of Kansas has implemented a new performance management system for paraprofessional staff to satisfy, in part, the "Developing Excellence in People" goal of the University's strategic plan. The new performance management system allows supervisors and staff to establish and comment on performance goals throughout the year and, at the end of the year, provide a rating for each goal. In addition, the system requires staff and supervisors to rate and comment on nine core competencies upon which the University's leadership determined staff should be evaluated. Due to a one-size-fits-all implementation, the definitions and examples supplied by the University for these competencies are necessarily generic. As part of its implementation of the new performance management system, the Cataloging and Archival Processing Department of the University of Kansas Libraries developed more specific examples for the competencies to encourage a shared understanding among staff and supervisors of how the nine core competencies were to be evaluated. This article describes the process by which the departmental managers created relevant examples that fit the work of the Department and how the process worked in its first year of implementation, from the perspective of the department head and a new supervisor.

Keywords

Performance evaluations, Core competencies

Background

In January 2015, the University of Kansas implemented a new performance management system for paraprofessional staff to satisfy, in part, Goal 5 of the university's 2012-2017 strategic plan *Bold Aspirations*, "Developing Excellence in People" (University of Kansas. Office of the Provost, 2011). The new performance management system is completely online and has two components, a section to set and comment on goals throughout the year and an annual performance appraisal administered at the end of the year. The University is implementing the system in three phases over a three-year period. The University of Kansas Libraries were in Phase II, which began in January 2016.

Prior to the new system, evaluations were paper-based with separate evaluation forms for University Support Staff (USS) and Unclassified Professional Staff (UPS). The University Support Staff evaluation form was standardized across campus and required rating six criteria, at least one goal, and an overall summary. The six evaluative criteria were what Armstrong (2014) refers to as behavioral competencies: Position Knowledge, Quantity of Work, Quality of Work, Working Relationships with Co-Worker(s), Customer Focus, and Leadership. The Leadership competency was only required where applicable. If desired, staff could fill out a feedback form consisting of four questions, one of which was "Describe your major accomplishments during the rating period."

The University allowed each School/Unit to develop their own evaluation process and form for unclassified professionals. For the Libraries, the evaluation form consisted of a page for the employee to detail their significant accomplishments and provide a progress report on their goals for the year, and a page for the supervisor to write a general summary of performance. This form was similar to that used for faculty annual evaluations.

In the new online performance evaluation system, both USS and UPS staff have the same evaluation form. Like the previous evaluation system, there is a way to establish and track goals throughout the year, evaluate and comment on the goals at the end of the year, and a section for the supervisor to provide an overall summary of the employee's performance. Similar to the previous USS evaluation form, the new evaluation contains nine core competencies identified by the University's leadership. Missing from the performance evaluation is a way for the employee to detail any major accomplishments.

University Core Competencies

As part of the implementation process for the new performance management system, the University's Human Resource Management Department provided training sessions for how to fill out the goals section of the system, along with an overview of the evaluation itself. They have set up a website that contains tutorials and written documentation for the mechanics of how to use the new evaluation system (University of Kansas Human Resource Management [KU HRM], n.d. a).

One of the steps Armstrong (2014) recommends when developing a competency-based framework for evaluations is communication and training. A website that lists and defines the nine core competencies chosen to be part of the evaluation was created by the University's Human Resource Management Department (KU HRM, n.d. b); however there is no explanation for how these particular competencies were chosen, or how the University plans to make use of them. This was likely due to the need to roll out the evaluation to multiple different units at the same time and because the university phased the new system over three years across the entire enterprise. In addition, the design of the evaluation form seems to imply that the competencies are the primary focus of the evaluation; however, very little information was provided about them during training sessions. To alleviate the necessarily generic training and provide departmental staff with Armstrong's recommended communication and training, the supervisors in the Cataloging and Archival Processing Department developed their own training and interpretations of the core competencies.

The nine core competencies used by the University are Accountability, Adaptability, Communication, Customer/Quality Focus, Inclusiveness, Innovation, Leadership, Occupational Knowledge/Technology Orientation, and Team Focus. The website includes the University's definitions of

the terms with examples for the ratings Needs Improvement, Meets Expectations, and Exceeds Expectations. The actual evaluation form contains two additional ratings, Unsatisfactory and Exceptional.

The definitions appear straightforward until you try to determine how you will evaluate the behaviors across a spectrum of Unsatisfactory through Exceptional. In addition, departmental supervisors quickly determined that no two people interpreted the definitions in the same way.

Implementation

The Cataloging and Archival Processing Department is comprised of 30 employees, 26 of whom are paraprofessional staff required to be evaluated through the new performance management system. To ensure that the five departmental supervisors understood how to use the new system and everyone was on the same page for how the department was going to implement it, the supervisors and department head held a series of meetings from December 2015 through March 2016 to come to a shared understanding of the core competencies.

As the departmental supervisors worked through the definitions and terms for the competencies on the website, they identified some areas that needed further exploring. For example, who is the customer or team defined in the Customer/Quality Focus and Team Focus competencies? Does customer only mean library patrons? Is a unit within the department, such as the manuscripts processing unit, a team? Is it the only team? The supervisors also felt that some definitions did not correspond to common understanding of the term. For instance, they thought it would be helpful to evaluate the leadership skills of those who supervise students and/or manage projects. However, the definition for the leadership competency, "Communicates personal vision and the University's vision in ways that gain the support of others. Mentors, motivates and guides others toward goals," and several of the examples listed for the competency, were too broad to pertain to departmental staff (KU HRM, n.d. b).

Several of the performance examples listed on the website for the competencies did not apply to staff in the Cataloging and Archival Processing Department positions. For instance, a "meets expectations" performance example under the Accountability competency was "is cost effective". What does that mean in relation to a cataloging position? Another issue was the listing of some behaviors in the performance examples that the supervisors did not want to emphasize. For example, "very committed to quality" was listed under the Customer/Quality Focus competency; however, the Cataloging Department has adopted a "good enough" approach to cataloging and archival processing so that staff can get materials out the door and on the shelves. The supervisors did not want to give staff the impression that it was acceptable to start obsessing about the placement of semicolons in catalog records again. They also found that some performance examples overlapped with examples in other competencies, for instance "excellent listening skills" under Team Focus and "excellent listener" under Communication. Additionally, the examples on the website did not include examples for what is required for an Exceptional rating (KU HRM, n.d. b).

To ensure that staff could easily identify their day-to-day tasks in the new evaluation system, the departmental supervisors adjusted some of the core competency definitions and created their own examples that reflect the work done by staff in the department. Table 1 provides a sample list of the competencies, along with a University supplied performance example and a Cataloging and Archival Processing Department example. The supervisors also decided to require everyone to have a goal summarizing their accomplishments at the end of the year because this was helpful in the previous evaluation system. Documentation of these changes to the evaluation form were provided at the beginning of the year so that staff knew what they would be evaluated on. In addition, one-on-one training was provided by the supervisors as needed to assist staff when they filled out their self-evaluations.

Competency	KU-supplied example	Cataloging Department example
Accountability	Is cost effective	Completes average amount of work within time limits
Communication	Excellent listener	Coworkers feel comfortable coming to this employee with questions or comments
Customer/quality focus	Very committed to quality	High quality work with few errors
Team focus	Excellent listening skills	Shows initiative in working with others to complete projects
Inclusiveness	Makes cynical or negative comments about the University and/or its strategic vision and goals	Inappropriate or offensive personal materials and/or media openly displayed

Table 1. Sample competencies and performance examples. KU-supplied examples are from spring 2016 and may have been updated since then.

Case Study from a New Supervisor's Perspective

Two department-wide meetings were held in 2016 in preparation for the performance management system change. The first meeting introduced the new competencies with the department's local examples and definitions and the goal for summarizing accomplishments. The second meeting went into more detail regarding how the evaluation piece would work once it opened to staff in the fall. Personnel management literature recommends making expectations clear between supervisor and employee (see, for example, Murphy, 2009; Chan, 2006; Taylor & Lee, 2014; Armstrong, 2014), including laying out the expectations upon which an employee will be evaluated for their work over a year. This meant that once the Cataloging and Archival Processing Department managers had agreed upon the local examples for the core competencies, they needed to roll this information out to the rest of the department so staff would know what they would be evaluated on for the year and would have the opportunity to ask questions and receive clarification as needed. Much of this clarification happened individually between the employee and the direct supervisor who would be writing the evaluation, rather than in larger departmental meetings.

Having localized, more specific examples for the core competencies, as well as a goal created to allow the employee a place to voice their accomplishments, helped make the transition to the new evaluation system smoother within the Cataloging and Archival Processing department. Anecdotally, staff in other units in the libraries and elsewhere on campus can find it difficult to fit major daily task work into the core competencies provided by the university, thus losing an opportunity to discuss accomplishments in categories that do not slot easily into those aspirational competencies. This also makes it more difficult for their supervisors to evaluate their work. Daily tasks do not necessarily easily fit into a goal-based system of tracking either; goals are better suited to larger projects and/or tasks that may be outside an employee's regular daily duties.

While the Manuscripts Coordinator, overseeing the manuscripts processing unit within the larger Cataloging and Archival Processing Department, had previously supervised full-time personnel prior to coming to the University of Kansas, she had never completed a formal personnel evaluation for staff she supervised. Coming to the University of Kansas at the end of calendar year 2015, she was able to focus on learning the new evaluation and personnel management system without preconceived notions about the old system, but also without much knowledge about how the old system had worked and what it had provided both departmental supervisors and employees.

The self-evaluation and core competency sections completed by supervised staff were both significant to completing an employee's overall evaluation. As a supervisor, the Manuscripts Coordinator gained additional insights from reading her staff's self-evaluations. While she had been meeting regularly with both of the unit's full-time staff throughout the year, she still found gaps. For example, there were differences in what the employee and supervisor found significant and in what each thought they were

doing well or poorly. Communication is a soft skill that can—and must—be continually learned and is not something somebody learns once and is done (Armstrong, 2014). Supervisors constantly need to refine how they communicate their expectations and ensure they are heard by the employees working for them.

Having a set of core competencies upon which to start the employee evaluation can also be beneficial. It provides a starting point and allows the supervisor to hone in on where an employee is excelling and where he or she could improve. The competencies provided at the university-level for all staff across the enterprise should not and cannot be of equal weight for all staff. Depending on a staff member's individual role and responsibilities, and the role of their unit within a larger department, some competencies are of more significance than others. Accountability and customer focus, for example, are particularly significant for cataloging and archival processing staff when one defines customers to include not just patrons in a reading room but also curatorial staff, librarians, public services staff helping patrons, and other staff within the libraries and on campus (KU HRM, n.d. b). The definition provided by the university did not clearly make this distinction, but the libraries' Cataloging and Archival Processing Department added a local definition to make this explicit. If technical services staff fail to do their work, or fail to do their work competently, this has a cascade effect upon most other services provided by the libraries, negatively impacting far more broadly than just the department. The Manuscripts Coordinator was able to use the competencies to flesh out and reinforce the general performance rating she provided for the entire evaluation of each employee in her unit.

Conclusions

As the literature indicates, there are several significant benefits to annual personnel evaluations, including an opportunity to reflect upon one's own work in a self-evaluation component and receiving feedback from one's supervisor (Armstrong, 2014). While supervisors should meet regularly with staff throughout the year to communicate expectations, handle problems or questions that arise spontaneously, and commend staff for work well done, an annual evaluation provides a formal mechanism in which to communicate growth or stagnation, to summarize major accomplishments from the year, and to detect where there is room for improvement.

As Armstrong (2014) and other human resource management experts indicate, annual performance evaluation conversations should not happen in a vacuum, and they should not come as a surprise (see also Chan, 2006; Murphy, 2009; Taylor & Lee, 2014). When implementing a brand-new evaluation system, or when changing a system such as what has occurred at the University of Kansas over the past three years, staff must be given adequate time to prepare and to learn about changes in expectations. These conversations *must* happen before a new system is implemented; while discussions may continue during and after an initial evaluation process or first use of a revised process, staff need to be given the opportunity beforehand to know how they will be evaluated so they can work toward those expectations. Because the University of Kansas was not able to provide an adequate framework when rolling out their new system, the Libraries' Cataloging and Archival Processing Department attempted to compensate for this shortcoming by creating local examples/expectations and preparing staff months before the new system went into effect. Communicating those expectations will continue to be an ongoing process for every supervisor that will require flexibility and adaptability, rather than be something a person can learn once and be done.

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