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Tools for a Statewide Performance Appraisal System for Extension Professionals

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Tools for a Statewide Performance Appraisal System for Extension Professionals

Abstract

In response to research demonstrating that Tennessee Extension agents desired a performance appraisal system that better reflected their jobs and provided for appraisers' professional development, a committee of University of Tennessee and Tennessee State University personnel undertook a 2-year initiative to revise the performance appraisal system. The committee produced a performance appraisal form and a performance appraisal rubric delineating performance factors, criteria, and performance-level descriptions; a comprehensive appraisal guide; and case studies and training guides for Extension professionals to use in learning about effective performance appraisal. Extension professionals conducting similar efforts in other states may benefit from using these tools.

Keywords: [performance appraisal](#), [Extension professionals](#), [program and staff development](#)

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Introduction

Appraisal, as a social phenomenon, is a basic human behavior of evaluating the work performance of oneself and others (Dulewicz, 1989). Performance appraisal is a process of interpreting and measuring degree of effectiveness, standards achieved, or performance goals met (Bernardin & Beatty, 1984). Performance appraisal is ubiquitous in the public and private sectors.

Management of employees and employees themselves represent important competitive advantages for organizations as other competitive factors are less powerful (Pfeffer, 1994; Squires & Adler, 1998) and organizations do not thrive without high-performance employees. Performance appraisals of educators must establish whether clientele's and society's educational needs are satisfied (Stufflebeam, 1988). Organizations depend on performance appraisal for a number of uses. Performance appraisal is necessary for organizations to make merit-pay decisions, make determinations about promotions, help employees improve performance, assign work more effectively, and identify instructional needs of employees (Baker, 1988; Bamberger &

Meshoulam, 2000; Bennett, 1981; Bernardin & Beatty, 1984; Daley, 1992; Patterson, 1987).

A survey of 218 Tennessee Extension agents showed that the vast majority (78.9%) agreed that the system by which their performance was appraised needed to be improved (Donaldson & French, 2013).

Recommendations indicated the need for development of a performance appraisal rubric that would more accurately reflect the Extension agent job as well as increased professional development for county directors who serve as appraisers of Extension agents' performance (Donaldson & French, 2013). In response to this research, a committee of University of Tennessee (UT) and Tennessee State University (TSU) personnel undertook a 2-year initiative to revise the performance appraisal system used by UT Extension and TSU Cooperative Extension. The committee comprised 16 UT and TSU Extension personnel representing county, regional, and departmental offices. As an agricultural and Extension education faculty member with expertise in performance appraisal research, I led the initiative.

Tools

In revising the performance appraisal system, we created instrumentation tools and instructional tools. These tools may be of use to Extension professionals conducting similar efforts in other states.

Instrumentation Tools

Our committee developed a performance appraisal form and a performance appraisal rubric. To select performance factors, criteria, and descriptions, we reviewed (a) actual job descriptions and position description questionnaires for the purpose of ensuring that the revised performance system would reflect Extension professionals' actual jobs; (b) performance appraisal forms used at the University of Florida and Florida A&M State University (University of Florida IFAS Extension, 2014) and Virginia Tech and Virginia State University (Virginia Cooperative Extension, 2015); and (c) feedback from nine high-performing Extension agents and county directors (selected by regional directors) who were asked to review the criteria.

This work produced five broad categories called performance factors and 16 performance criteria distributed across those categories (see Table 1). For each criterion, performance levels are rated using the scale 1 (*unsatisfactory*), 2 (*needs improvement*), 3 (*meets expectations*), 4 (*exceeds expectations*), and 5 (*exemplary*) (Donaldson et al., 2016). An example of the performance factors, criteria, and performance-level descriptions is shown in Figure 1; in the example, the performance factor is professionalism, the criterion is customer service, and the five performance levels relate to that criterion.

Table 1.
Performance Factors and Criteria

Performance factor	Criteria
Program development	Individual annual plan
Program management	Implementing
	Evaluation
	Reporting
	Resource management

Program accomplishments	Base programs Equity, access, and opportunity Outcomes/impacts
Professionalism	Customer service Policy compliance Professional development Technology and innovation Work habits
Community and organizational leadership	Interpersonal skills Leadership Optimizing human capital

Figure 1.

Customer Service Criterion and Performance-Level Descriptions

Performance Factor: Professionalism				
Customer Service				
Unsatisfactory (1)	Needs Improvement (2)	Meets Expectations (3)	Exceeds Expectations (4)	Exemplary (5)
Does not communicate in response to client needs/requests and/or ignores client needs.	Occasionally fails to respond to client needs or requests.	Responds to client needs or requests in a timely and professional manner. Works well with all clientele groups. Communicates respectfully to all requests.	Proactively addresses client needs or requests.	Anticipates and addresses emerging client needs or requests.

The performance appraisal form we developed became the first such document jointly approved by Extension administration, general counsels, and human resources departments of both UT and TSU. The appraisal form is available online at

https://extension.tennessee.edu/eesd/Documents/HR/Appraisal/Joint_Appraisal_Form_Final.pdf.

Instructional Tools

In addition to the performance appraisal form and rubric, we developed guidance materials to facilitate the effectiveness of the performance appraisal process.

- The initiative's *Executive Summary* provides an overview of performance appraisal in society and in Cooperative Extension (Donaldson et al., 2017). This tool, which identifies all performance factors, criteria, and performance-level descriptions, is available online at <https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W396-A.pdf>.

- The *Appraisal Guide for the Tennessee Extension Performance Appraisal System* is a 57-page guide for employees and supervisors (Donaldson, 2017a). This tool is available online at <https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W396-B.pdf>.
- The *Case Studies for Assessing Performance Facilitation Guide* is a 26-page guide that supports professional development for effective performance appraisal (Donaldson, 2017b). This tool is available online at <https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/W455.pdf>.
- One-day regional workshops were used for introducing the revised Tennessee Extension Performance Appraisal System. These workshops were taught by regional directors using standard objectives, visuals, and scripts (Donaldson, 2017c). The workshops also involved use of the previously mentioned *Case Studies for Assessing Performance Facilitation Guide*. The standard objectives, visuals, and a script for conducting the workshop are available online at https://extension.tennessee.edu/eesd/Documents/HR/Appraisal/Perf_Appraisal_Regional_Workshop_Fall_2016_Script.pdf.

Discussion

The University of Arkansas adapted the performance factors, criteria, and performance-level descriptions for use in Arkansas (University of Arkansas, 2016). Research to evaluate the effectiveness of the performance appraisal systems in both Tennessee and Arkansas is recommended. Research should address how performance appraisal based on use of the new tools may influence, if at all, effective education and community engagement. Additionally, research should ascertain Extension agents' perceptions of the system used to appraise their performance, consistent with work by Davis and Verma (1993).

Careful planning and budgeting is needed when revising a performance appraisal system. The revision reported here was a 2-year effort requiring a \$107,000 budget of state-designated Extension funds that supported (a) one graduate research assistant working 20 hr per week and (b) mileage, meals, and lodging for 16 committee members to participate in five face-to-face meetings (2 days each).

Revising a state performance appraisal system may be an important strategy for generating an instrument that encourages employee success. However, it is just as important to consider how the change can be supported through instructional tools and resources that will produce consistency in implementation and confidence among employees and supervisors. With our initiative, we considered both matters and developed a comprehensive set of relevant materials.

Author Note

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