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Managing Performance in Extension: Redesigning the Performance Evaluation System at Illinois

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Managing Performance in Extension: Redesigning the Performance Evaluation System at Illinois

Abstract

This article describes the initiative of a large Extension system to improve its performance management system. Information on the utility of the present system was sought from a wide range of stakeholders, and key strengths and weaknesses were identified. The revision focused on updating and simplifying the performance dimensions, creating a single set of requirements for all levels of staff, and moving towards an electronic submission, storage, and retrieval system for evaluative information. The article concludes with implementation and evaluation strategies and lessons learned along the continuous improvement path of performance management at Illinois.

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Introduction

Managing employee performance is a critical task in any organization. Effectively managing performance contributes positively to employee satisfaction, retention, and engagement, and thus has important internal and external outcomes. Performance management is regarded as one of the most troubling areas of human resource management, with over 95% of organizations reporting considerable dissatisfaction with its implementation (Bernardin, Kane, Ross, Spina, & Johnson, 1995). Because of this, the improvement and redesign of performance management systems, in whole or in part, play a major role in systematic organization development efforts (Cummings & Worley, 2005).

Much of the research and practitioner literatures address performance management in the context of for-profit organizations, but it is of equal or even greater importance in higher education and in Extension systems. Extension employees are typically close to their clients, and poor performance is immediately evident. Extension work is diverse, flexible, and tailored to client needs and thus resists routine application of policies and procedures. Finally, Extension systems employ highly educated and professional staff with unique expertise and skill sets working in collegial environments where traditional command-and-control supervision is rarely appropriate.

Performance Management at University of Illinois Extension

U of I Extension (UIE) is based in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. UIE is administratively divided into five regions, each headed by a regional director. County-level directors coordinate the work of Extension educators and specialists. 700 Extension staff members in 77 unit offices are located throughout the state and are aided by volunteers who serve on local advisory councils, provide direction for U of I Extension programming, and ensure that programs meet critical needs.

In 1993, a performance evaluation system was developed with the goal of improving fairness, efficiency, and relevance. The evaluation system was based on some 12 critical skill areas--such as marketing/public relations, program planning and development, resource development--and was tailored to the individual position. The system appeared satisfactory at the time and was praised by other units on the Illinois campus as innovative because of the blend of developmental and evaluative outcomes (Cederblom, 1982) built into the process.

In 2003, the UIE leadership team decided to revisit the annual appraisal system. While the process was deemed functional, a formal review was seen as justified because feedback and discussion of various areas requiring improvement had emerged over the years. Perhaps more important, the review was initiated in the context of changing directions at the university, campus, and Extension levels. This was expressed in a strategic agenda document that identified a set of priorities to "strengthen programs and make [Extension] more responsive to the changing needs of its students and the citizens of the state" (University of Illinois Extension, 2003, p. 2).

UIE leadership appointed a 13-member taskforce comprised of representatives from each of the five regions, a regional director, the Director of Human Resources, and a faculty member in Human Resource Development as external consultant and facilitator. The taskforce began its work in 2004 and concluded its work in 2006; implementation training of the new system was completed in the fall of 2006, and the revised system was implemented in 2007.

Taskforce Process Approach

Early in its work, the taskforce made two important decisions related to the process and theoretical orientation of its work. The first decision was to adopt a participatory and data-based process to accomplish its work. The second decision was to frame the revision of the annual performance evaluation system in the broader context of assessing the performance management system, thus approaching the appraisal process in a systematic and holistic fashion.

Participatory approaches to organizational change are contrasted with top-down decision-making or importation of a process or system developed elsewhere; they focus on decision-making based on solid evidence and place strong emphasis on reflection and deliberation to determine the most appropriate course of action (McLean, 2006). Such approaches require time and energy, and are appropriate when the solution to a problem is not known, when solutions cannot be copied from other organizations, and, perhaps most important, when a high level of commitment by staff members to the eventual solution is seen as important. Because performance management was highly important to UIE, given its collaborative and collegial culture its commitment to research-based decision-making, this approach was selected for the project.

The taskforce concluded that in order to receive full benefits from a revised appraisal system, performance rewards and recognition should also be investigated and, if necessary, revised. The leadership team concurred but cautioned the taskforce to stay within the bounds of those policies and procedures that could potentially be changed within Extension and would not require campus or university-system related changes. Thus, the larger system within which UIE operated provided the boundary for the change initiative.

The effectiveness of any performance appraisal system is contingent on a number of factors, including the purpose of the appraisal, the appraisal technique and content, characteristics of the appraiser, and the employee's specific job (Cederblom, 1982). In addition, the extent to which an individual believes that he or she understands the overall role and process of the organization's performance appraisal system may be very important in determining how he or she views the organization in general and the appraisal process in particular (Williams & Levy 1992).

Project Milestones and Outcomes

The taskforce approached each major stakeholder group and obtained information for its analysis from a wide range of sources, including the regional directors, all Extension staff, UIE professional groups, Extension systems in surrounding states, University of Illinois academic departments, national professional networks, and the academic literature. Data from personal interviews, written surveys, and document reviews were collected and analyzed, using standard quantitative and qualitative methods. The data collection phase resulted in a large number of documents, including best practice reports, evaluation frameworks used in other Extension systems, research reports, evaluation policies used at other University of Illinois units, transcripts of interviews, and survey results. In addition, a comparative analysis of 16 Extension systems in other states was conducted, and the performance clusters, rating scales, reporting requirements, and feedback mechanisms were investigated.

Taskforce members summarized the large amount of information and categorized the findings in

four major points.

1. Extension employees did, in fact, expect their performance management system to be viewed as a comprehensive set of policies, procedures, and practices that include:

- Formal and informal appraisal, evaluation, and feedback;
- Formal and informal, material and non-material rewards and recognition; and
- Goal setting.

2. The UI Extension process for assessing performance through an annual review of each staff member by his or her regional director was seen as a reasonably effective and successful way of managing performance. Strong points included a certain level of system-wide process standardization coupled with regional flexibility; the opportunity for an employee and the regional director to discuss accomplishments and challenges one-on-one; and the means of negotiating and reaching agreement on expectations, goals, and job descriptions.

3. The performance appraisal system was perceived as needing improvement in the following areas:

- Burden of the appraisal process on the regional directors;
- Limited opportunities to observe first-hand each employee in a given region;
- Burden on employees in completing the self-evaluation;
- Lack of alignment between the current list of competencies and the Strategic Agenda;
- Lack of differentiation in performance management at different levels of tenure within UI Extension;
- Lack of a comprehensive way of determining client satisfaction;
- Lack of a focus on teamwork and team contributions in the appraisal;
- Insufficient use of multi-rater/multi-dimensional ratings;
- System not uniformly perceived as fair and equitable; and

- Weak link between performance ratings and rewards.
- Insufficient rewards and recognition structure, few incentives for superior performance, and few disincentives for sub-par performance.

The Revised System of Performance Management at Illinois

While the basic structure of the old system was maintained--monthly activity reports, completion of an annual self-evaluation, annual meetings between each employee and the regional director, determination of goals and professional development needs for the next year--major changes were made to the process and content of the evaluation system. First, the taskforce redefined and revised the critical skill areas that formed the basis of performance goals and evaluations. Where the old system contained between 10 and 12 sets of competencies, the new system revised these in light of the strategic direction of the organization and clustered the individual competencies into five large groupings, namely:

- Program Accomplishments;
- Professional Competencies;
- Interpersonal Effectiveness;
- Organizational Development and Leadership; and
- Scholarship of Engagement.

The critical skills clusters and associated individual competencies are now described in terms of detailed behavioral objectives and operational definitions. Whereas the old system asked each employee to assign a numeric rating to his or her performance for each individual competency, the self-ratings have been eliminated, and instead employees are now asked to write a narrative description of accomplishments for each of the five clusters. Further, where the old system contained different competencies for various levels within UIE, the revised system is based on a combined set of performance objectives and competencies with the understanding that employees will pay greater attention to those competencies that are relevant to their jobs and ignore others, provided that their regional director is in agreement.

Finally, the list of competencies and critical performance areas used in the annual report is integrated into the monthly required activity reports and also into the third-year review and promotion; this provides a unified set of performance expectations and required competencies monthly and annually, at the 3-year mark after hire, at promotion time, and in post-tenure reviews. This integrated approach allows employees to focus on a set of important and clearly articulated expectations, avoids duplicate reporting of information, and creates awareness from the first monthly report of which behaviors are expected and rewarded.

Using a newly designed electronic submission form for the monthly report simplifies the completion of the annual report. Only a high-level summary of key accomplishments is required annually, and the necessary detail information is captured electronically in the monthly activity report. The smaller number of higher-level summaries of key accomplishments simplifies the review of the annual reports for the regional directors, who can be responsible for evaluating as many as 80 employees each year.

The changes to the promotion system are facilitated by the improved consistency and relevance of the evaluation format. Having defined the content of expected performance and provided behavioral anchors, documentation of performance and determination whether an employee has met the threshold of performance expected for promotion now proceeds along clearly defined lines. The formal and comprehensive review after 3 years of employment with UIE, the promotion dossier, and post-tenure reviews for promotion to Level 3 also follow the same parameters.

Little progress was made with respect to the rewards and recognition scheme up to this point. While a subcommittee of the taskforce had collected a fair amount of information and suggestions, systems constraints in terms of resources, career paths, and budgets prevented their implementation. Nonetheless, the report of the subcommittee on rewards and recognition was taken under advisement by the UIE leadership team and resulted in a number of long-term ideas to improve this important area of performance management.

Implementation

The final revisions were approved in 2006, and a comprehensive communication and training strategy was implemented in each of the five regions. The revised monthly reporting system was implemented in late 2006, and the new annual system was used for the first time in 2007. Face-to-face meetings in each region with the regional directors and key members of the taskforce were used to introduce UIE staff to the new system. As the redesign represented a substantial improvement but not radical change, the discussions and questions related to a limited number of

issues.

First among those was the increased emphasis on scholarship. While the definition of scholarship was comprehensive and inclusive, following the ideas of Ernest Boyer (1997) and Theodore Alter (2003), there was substantial concern by employees about how this expectation was to be fulfilled. Regional Directors pointed to the multiple ways in which scholarship of engagement can be defined and measured, and encouraged further dialogue and increased understanding over the coming months and years to meet this objective which, after all, was a major strategic goal for UIE.

A second area of concern was related to the increased emphasis on entrepreneurship and the potential tension between serving existing clients and developing down new opportunities and resources. Here, again, the discussion and clarification by the regional directors helped define the notion of entrepreneurship and its meaning for the Extension organization and its staff.

A third area of frequent concern was related to the combined set of performance metrics for Extension educators, county directors, and Extension specialists. These concerns were allayed by explaining that individuals could omit certain areas that were not relevant given their assignments and job descriptions where this was agreed to with the regional director and their supervisor.

Evaluation Plan, Lessons Learned and Further Questions

As with all major projects, evaluation, further revisions, and fine-tuning are planned once the annual system is in use. Formal and informal feedback at the systems, regional, and local levels will be sought and used to determine what areas are working well and where further improvements are needed. These activities will take place at the regional level and will be reported and discussed at the system level to determine whether a broader evaluation is warranted. While the taskforce has been disbanded, its members continue to be thought leaders with respect to the revised system, monitoring the system, communicating with each other, and offering observations to their supervisors and regional directors.

Several lessons from this project appear noteworthy. The first relates to the usefulness of a thorough planning phase where information from all relevant sources is sought, assessed, condensed, and discussed as a foundation for action planning. A second lesson relates to the importance of involving a broad range of stakeholders and, in particular, those who will be using the revised system.

A third lesson is related to the need to tailor organizational systems to the specific needs of the institution. While Illinois is similar to other Extension systems in its use of defined competency clusters and self-evaluations, the particulars are uniquely shaped to meet Illinois' strategy and goals. Copying another state's system, however well designed and functional there, would likely have been ineffective. Performance management systems, like other important components of Extension organizations, should be seen as organic entities that require interpretation, modification, enforcement, and dialogue. While the project resulted in a series of policy and procedure documents, flexibility and adaptation are needed at the regional and local levels to fit these broad guidelines to the individual circumstances and situations of the task at hand.

Finally, the project opened the door for additional questions. One addresses the role of rewards and recognitions that were identified as crucial performance drivers. Within the constraints of a university system, formal rewards and recognitions are limited and likely to be less and fewer than in the for-profit sector. Given the limited potential to reward good and punish sub-standard performance, how can Extension systems provide incentives and manage performance effectively?

Second, what are the areas of similarity and dissimilarity among different states' performance management systems? An initial analysis that was conducted as a part of this project suggests quite substantial contrasts regarding the content and process used, but published analyses could not be found.

Last, and perhaps most important, will this revised performance evaluation and management system move UIE closer to fulfilling its strategic goals? Is the annual evaluation system sufficiently robust to increase levels of scholarship, entrepreneurship, innovative uses of technology, and new partnerships? Only further investigation and additional projects and taskforces will be able to provide answers to these important questions.

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