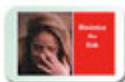




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Effective Evaluations – An Oxymoron? *The Mischief is in the Myth*

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Recently I coached a supervisor in the McGrath SUCCEED Supervision, Evaluation and Leadership course who said that the best way to avoid a fight at evaluation time is to put a batch of neutral phrases in the computer and distribute them randomly among the employee evaluations. "That 's how I contain the damage caused by saying something the employee might not like," he told me.

Underscoring just how pervasive this reticence to evaluate and communicate honestly with employees is, a school principal shared that in her school district "the only way to tell the difference between competent and marginal employees when reading the formal evaluation summary is there are fewer superlatives."



I invite you to look into the personnel office files of any school district, anywhere in the United States or Canada. What you will most likely find is that among the evaluations housed there, you can count on the fingers of one hand the number that have unsatisfactory ratings. More than likely, you will not get past the number one, if even that.

Time and again district administrators note this problem and reach the conclusion that "the cure" is to redesign the evaluation process and procedures and redraft the evaluation forms, yet one more time. Though this approach has failed time and again, they're just absolutely certain that this time it will work. They have the right people on the committee; the employee association supports the cause; they are using the best researched, most comprehensive approach the educational consultants have come up with; and they are even standards-based!

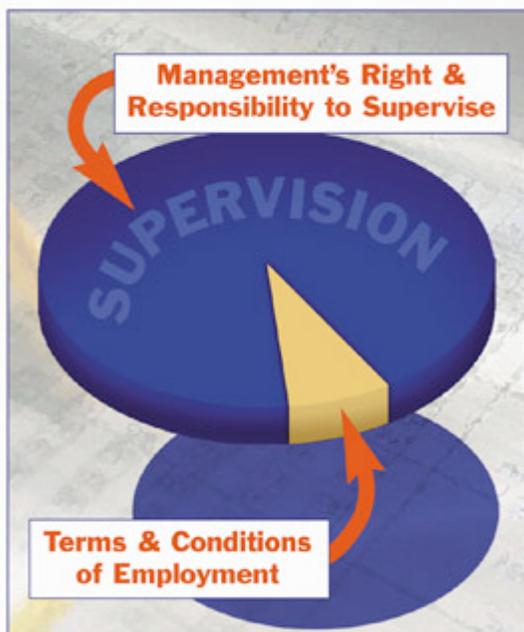
Despite all the best intentions, another evaluation tweak will make no significant difference in the long run. Evaluators will still not tell the truth about employee performance because the form is not the problem.

The Mischief is in the Myth

Unbeknownst to them, administrators and supervisors have inherited a belief system of mythic

proportion that has left them frequently paralyzed and feeling impotent in their responsibility to supervise their employees. The myth is that all their power to interact with their employees regarding performance is controlled and dominated by the union or employee association.

To make this clear, let's draw a circle. Now imagine that all the authority and responsibility of the elected school board to govern is contained within that circle. The governing board delegates the authority to run the school district to the superintendent who in turn assigns duties to others for the fulfillment of the responsibility. Within that responsibility is the duty of school administrators to supervise the effective performance of school employees--at all levels, in both the certificated and classified ranks.



Now, in that imagined circle, mark off a pie wedge that is a small portion of the entire circle. Label that wedge " *terms and conditions of employment, including representation in disciplinary matters* ."

Wages, hours, benefits, as well as representation in disciplinary matters are included in the terms and conditions of employment. Now take the remainder of the circle and label it " *Management's Right and Responsibility to Supervise* ." This part of the circle is not subject to collective bargaining and is the purview of the administration.

Employee representatives are highly motivated to have you believe and operate as if those portions are reversed-- that supervisor's authority is subject to union intervention in all matters, not just a small segment. Here's the crux of the matter. Unless explicitly negotiated otherwise, the substance of supervision, evaluation, and discipline--the actual guts of communication between supervisor and employee--is not negotiable, only the procedures that will be followed in the evaluation process and in disciplinary matters.

Now here's where the mischief occurs. A communication, especially one in writing that was not intended to be disciplinary, may be cast as disciplinary by the union, given that discipline is within their piece of the pie. But the fact that something is in writing does not convert it to discipline just by virtue of the fact it is in writing. Discipline includes the threat of punishment and penalty, while supervisory communication does not. Punishment or penalty is the deciding factor--not that the communication is written.

In truth, you have a much broader power base from which to make a difference in the performance of your employees than you think. It is fine to invite the union into a supervisory discussion with you and the employee as a demonstration of your open door policy--but not because you feel you have to just because something was put into writing.

Let's look at the affect this mischievous myth has had on how many, many administrators respond to employee performance.

Good-bye Middle Ground

In this all-or-nothing mindset, supervisory communication becomes black or white: say nothing and avoid confrontation, or rely on an authoritative, disciplinary type delivery that causes a cascading backlash of union meetings, grievances, and strife. Any real substance-- the middle ground where constructive communication might occur--is lost in the tug of war.

Without a middle ground in supervisory communication, it is impossible for administrators to do their real job, which is to support the growth and development of their employees through effective supervision-- even when the performance needs enhancement. The cost to administrators of the either/or (all good or all bad) is that they are not viewed as valued partners in their employees' growth and so sacrifice providing leadership to their school communities.

The Solution: Effective and Successful Communication

The solution, as I stated at the beginning of this article, is not to design new and improved evaluation instruments endlessly, but to train administrators and supervisors to communicate and relate effectively on a regular basis. The written records of employees' performance don't have to be either empty missives or loaded bombs when relationship is established and honest, professional feedback is routine.

Administrators must learn the principles of constructive communication--the middle ground in which communication can explore the complex area of performance enhancement. Matters are then handled in a timely fashion rather than building up to the point where the only resort is a disciplinary mode, and employees are given useful feedback to grow and develop. The evaluation summary becomes the endpoint in a series of contributory interactions-- both verbal and written-- aimed at eliciting the best from employees. Extraordinary results are produced out of constructive communication and administrators are empowered to be effective agents of growth and development in the eyes of their employees-- and even in the eyes of those who represent their employees!

Mary Jo McGrath is an education law attorney and CEO of McGrath Training Systems and creator of the *McGrath SUCCEED with Supervision, Evaluation, and Leadership Course*. McGrath programs blend legal integrity with human dynamics for a unique, powerful and effective approach to professional development for administrators. For more information go to www.mcgrathinc.com

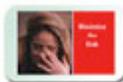
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