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FMA National President
Patricia Niehaus

Happy New Year, Team FMA!

I hope you and your families had a joyous Holiday Season and I wish you a very Happy New Year.

It was a busy fall for FMA with three Region Meetings: Region 2 started us off on Amelia Island; a Joint Meeting of Regions 3 and 4 followed in Sacramento; and finally, Region 1 met in Pittsburgh. As I've said before, my favorite part of being your President is meeting our members. If you aren't planning to attend the National Convention, please consider attending a Region Meeting in 2015. This is your opportunity to connect with other members in your Region as well as the National Office Staff and Officers.

I'd like to welcome back two recently re-established chapters! Dora Quinlan, our National Secretary, spearheaded the effort to re-establish Chapter 395 at Patuxent River in Maryland and several managers at the Naval Post Graduate School, including Mike Fitzgerald, who transferred there from Hawaii, re-started the Del Monte Chapter 308 in Monterey, CA. We've found that the best membership recruiters are members of chapters. If you know a manager who works in another agency or installation or who has transferred from your chapter, please talk to them about establishing a chapter at their new location. There is strength in numbers and FMA will definitely need all the strength we can muster in the coming year.

2014 was a busy year for FMA, and 2015 will be no different. Sequestration is still looming over us and the attacks on our jobs and our pay and benefits will, unfortunately, not be going away any time soon. Region Conference attendees generously supported FMA-PAC and now I'm asking all of our members to do the same, either through payroll deduction or by sending in a one-time donation. FMA-PAC ensures access to our Members of Congress. Our work is not over simply because the 2014 elections have passed; in fact, we now have even more work ahead of us. I also urge you to visit your Members of Congress local offices and remind them that you are not only federal managers, but their constituents and that your vote matters. Take the time to let your Members of Congress know how their actions impact you and your employees. Attend their Town Halls and other meetings and identify yourself as an FMA member. This is also one of the best opportunities I can think of for a group outing for your chapter. If one of your Members of Congress has a fundraiser that you'd like to attend, please contact Katie Maddocks in the National Office *(KMaddocks@fedmanagers.org)* to arrange funding.

Please keep the Hatch Act in mind when you're contacting your Members of Congress and when forwarding emails to your fellow managers. Although the 2014 election is over, it is still important to remember not to use your government emails or phones for anything political. As always, if the National Office doesn't have your home email, send it to Katie Redmond at *KRedmond@fedmanagers.org*.

Our National Convention will be March 8-11, 2015 and we'll be back at the DoubleTree Hotel in Crystal City, with views of the National Mall and the Capitol. We have a great agenda, including great training, in the works so you won't want to miss it! Our theme this year is ***Federal Managers – Building the Government of Tomorrow.*** I look forward to seeing you there!

Finally, thank you for all you do on a daily basis to serve our great country and for your dedication to the Federal Managers Association. I hope to personally meet even more members in 2015!

Pat

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All materials submitted to *The Federal Manager* should pertain to public service managers. Copy should be double-spaced, no longer than 10 pages. High resolution color images, charts, or illustrations should be included if possible. Text should be submitted by email or on compact disc. Include a biography of the author.

Performance Evaluations

Recognizing the Value of Supervisory Management

By James N. Phillips, Jr.

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For supervisors, nothing is certain except disciplinary actions and performance appraisals. The challenge for the supervisor is to reduce the likelihood of a negative experience in both.

In my years of supervisory management, I have come across instances where good people were promoted to positions to which they were ill-equipped. As my career became more professionally focused, I observed that acquisition professionals in many instances were promoted to supervisory management positions and poorly prepared to perform the tasks for which they were promoted to do. This is not to diminish the potential of good professionals advancing into leadership positions; it is recognition that supervisory management is a discipline requiring the skills and abilities to be applied to the unique role of supervisory management.

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"Organizations spend countless hours and dollars on the regulatory and legal implications of [supervisory management], but fail to address the fundamentals of the job."

Supervisory management is the first formal role in organizational leadership. The supervisory manager, at the lowest level, assigns work, ensures availability of resources for the assigned work, and evaluates work progress of his or her employees. In most instances, supervisory management is treated as a soft skill; one you can learn on the fly. Organizations spend countless hours and dollars on the regulatory and legal implications of the job, but fail to address the fundamentals, which include concepts such as: how to assign work; how to resource assigned work; and, how to evaluate work performance.

In many ways, learning supervisory management is like "craft" work – more art than science. In craft work there is a hierarchy of expertise. Each person along the way has achieved a level of expertise and is recognized for having advanced skills. For example, an apprentice would work for a master craftsman for many years until he or she learned the craft and was able to go out on his or her own, hence the name "journeyman." Vestiges of this still exist in skilled trades, such as carpenters, plumbers, electricians, or physicians (residencies and internships), and fellowship and leadership programs, such as "Presidential Fellows" or the "Contract Management Leadership Development Program." It is important to recognize that these programs are highly interactive and require mutual engagement. However, supervisory managers are only given enough information to cover the risk of the organization from legal problems, which means they often fall short in providing usable tools and techniques to exercise their office.

The assumption by people who promote high achievers is that a great technician can make a wonderful supervisor. This assumption falls flat on its face if one reads *The Peter Principle*,[1] which states: "Employees tend to rise to their level of incompetence." This means every employee has a level at which if promoted to he or she would not function well.

Performance Appraisals

The annual ritual of signing the performance appraisal is an opportunity for the supervisor to close a successful year with an employee who has done a superlative job and to discuss the future. For many, it is a struggle to properly acknowledge the appropriate level of performance for the actual contribution to the organization. This is the challenge for every supervisor and the direction of this article.

The challenge is often compounded by a number of factors such as last year's performance, quality of this year's assessment, the employee's influence in the organization, the employee's influence on a process or project, etc. Decisions are often made based on what could happen if a lower evaluation was given versus the impact on the organization. In this case, the problem is about being held hostage, not performance.

Supervisory managers need to better understand their role as an evaluator and use the tools available to create the proper methods to help the evaluation process. At a minimum, a supervisor must do the following:

- Read and understand the "position description" of the employee,
- Develop a "performance plan,"
- Meet periodically with the employee, and
- Assess the employee according to the standards set forth in the performance plan.

[1] L.J. Peter and R. Hull, *The Peter Principle* (New York: William Morrow & Company Inc., 1969).

Position Description

The "position description" is the first document to be reviewed. It represents the work that this position is supposed to do. It provides an understanding of the work this position is to perform. Additionally, it will define the following:

- The amount of discretion the person will have in decision-making in the exercise of his or her office;
- The degree of flexibility the person will have in making decisions based on formal guidance, written procedures, and practice; and,
- The level of autonomy – i.e., independence from formal supervisor oversight.

It is important that this document is current and reflects the actual work performed by the position. Often a pitfall of an organization is that an employee's position description does not match the actual work of the employee. This is usually due to administrative lethargy; "It's not broken, so don't fix it – we have more important things to do." The reality is the opposite; when a position's work is significantly changed, it is important to have the position description reflect it. If this occurs, it is paramount to revise the position description to actually reflect the work being performed.

Performance Plan

A "performance plan" is built off of two principle documents: the first is the aforementioned position description, and the second is the supervisor's performance plan. A performance plan is usually established to assess a period of performance (time period) of an individual against pre-established performance criteria. These criteria are based in the position description and represent the functional work performed by the employee in furthering the mission of the organization. A performance plan should also provide graduated standards for acceptable work, which is: "doing your job;" higher-level work representing significant contributions to the overall goals of the organization in a meaningful way; and, the highest level of work, which is a "stretch goal" representing a significant and sustained contribution to the overall goals of the organization in a significant way.

Note the adjectives of "acceptable," "sustained," "meaningful," and "significant" (add your own) represent the qualitative nature of a performance plan. The adjectives add depth and breadth to the work of the employee.

A best practice in developing performance plans is to have the supervisor and the employee develop them jointly and come to an agreement on the plan. Sometimes a performance plan cannot be mutually agreed upon. In those cases, the supervisor must articulate the expectations.

Periodic Meetings – the Value of Face Time

Once the performance plan is created and, hopefully, mutually agreed upon, it is important to meet periodically with the employee to assess progress and to make mid-course corrections if need be. The periodicity of the meetings should be based on the needs of the organization. For example, if the job is highly routine with minimal changes and low risk, performance plan meetings may not be needed as often as if the opposite is true, when more meetings may be required.

A best practice for supervisors is to meet with their employees to mentor and coach for professional development, as well as to discuss performance plan progress. A good supervisor recognizes that it is the employee who gets the work done, so the supervisor must learn how to motivate his or her employees.

Quick Thought on Motivation

The scope of this article is not about how to motivate employees; however, it is worth noting the influence of motivation on the performance appraisal process. It is often thought that only money motivates employees, but that is incorrect: Money has a short term motivational influence.[2] Consider other nonmonetary motivating actions that may influence performance, such as training, job enhancement, job enrichment, and positions on key committees.

If money doesn't motivate, what will? Motivation and performance are directly influenced by meaningful rewards and the expectancy the awards will occur if the performance level is achieved.[3] There are those who believe that performance for performance's sake is noble, yet most people want to see a relationship between performance and reward. It has been said that "what gets measured gets done."[4] It has also been said that "what gets measured and rewarded gets done well."[5]

The End of Period Evaluation

The end of the performance period evaluation is not the time to discover performance problems or shortcomings. Whenever the end-of-period rating occurs, and whatever the rating is, it should not be a surprise to the employee or a challenge to the supervisor. If the supervisor has met with the employee periodically and reviewed his or her performance based on objective criteria created from the performance plan, he or she should enter this period with a clear conscience, with no regrets.

However, a pitfall that all supervisors are not immune to is the "proximity impact rule," which states the closer a negative event occurs to the end of a

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[2] Based on Frederick Herzberg's *"Two-Factor Theory,"* a.k.a *"Motivator-Hygiene Theory."* (See *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Two-factor_theory*.)

[3] Based on Victor Vroom's *"Expectancy Theory."* (See *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expectancy_theory*.)

[4] M. Chitty, *"What Gets Measured Gets Done – Recognition and Reward,"* Progressive Managers' Network Blog, available at *http://progmanager.wordpress.com/2007/12/18/what-gets-measured-gets-done-recognition-and-reward*.

[5] M. LeBouef, *"The Greatest Management Principle in the World,"* Manager Tools Blog, available at *www.manager-tools.com/forums-2249*.

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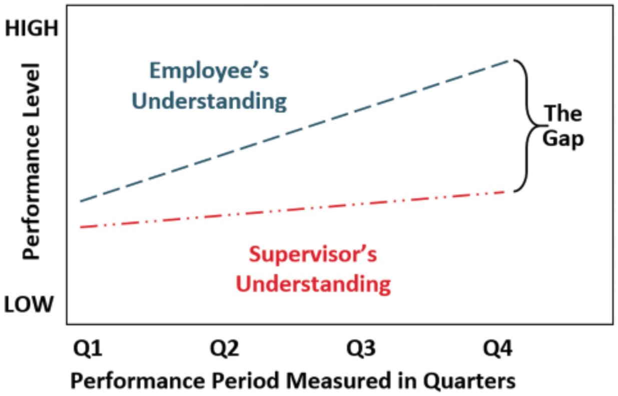
performance period, the greater influence it will have over the ultimate rating. In other words, a person can have 11 consecutive months of outstanding work, but if the last month has a negative hiccup, it will be the last month that overshadows the superlative effort of the rest of the year.

Figure 1, The Gap



The Gap

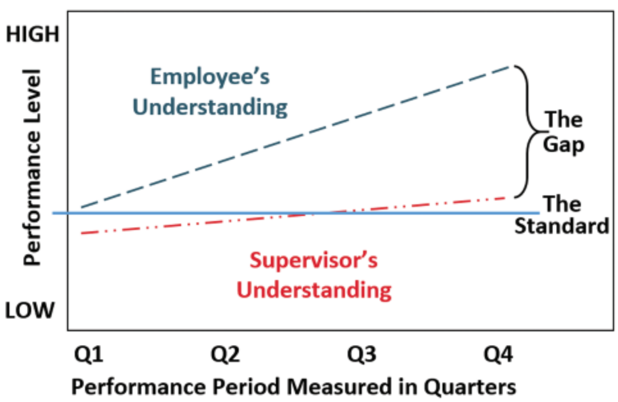
When both the employee and the supervisor are in sync, there is a "meeting of the minds" on the evaluation. The challenge is when there is a disparity between the employee's and supervisor's understanding of the contribution of the employee. In most instances, employees see themselves as having contributed more or having performed at a higher level while supervisors see a lower level of performance. This disparity represents a gap of understanding performance contribution by both parties.

For the supervisor, figure 1 is a graphic representation of the lack of a meeting of the minds. It is important to note that "the gap" widens over time. This increase in the gap occurs when there is little communication between the employee and supervisor. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the supervisor to identify gap issues and reconcile them early. Failure to address a widening gap early on in the performance period is a tacit acceptance of performance by the supervisor and makes correction of behavior more difficult.

Consider this same model; what would occur if you added a "standard line" representing the expectations articulated in the performance plan? As depicted in figure 2, the standard line provides context to the actual performance.

In figure 1, something occurred and the employee and the supervisor were at odds as to the contribution of the performance. In figure 2, the employee considers his or her contributions to be high, while the supervisor evaluates the performance at or just above the standard. The standard is the performance baseline.

Figure 2, The Gap with Standard Line



This gap reflects the struggle supervisors and employees have on a continual basis. It represents the degree to which the employee and the supervisor are not in agreement regarding the final rating on a performance appraisal. This is important as it represents the sense of contribution by the employee and evaluation of that contribution by the supervisor. The gap illustrates the divergent expectations of the employee and supervisor.

What Causes the Gap?

As mentioned before, the gap represents the expectations of both the employee and the supervisor to the work performed during the performance period. Potential causes of the gap include:

- Ambiguous or unclear performance expectations;
- Lack of a "meeting of the minds" between employee and supervisor;
- Lack of mid-course corrections by the supervisor for the employee;
- The employee having a belief that he or she performed better than he or she actually did;
- Minimal performance meetings between employee and supervisor;
- Position descriptions not matching actual work performed;
- Unreal expectations by the supervisor, and/or,
- Unarticulated expectations of the supervisor.

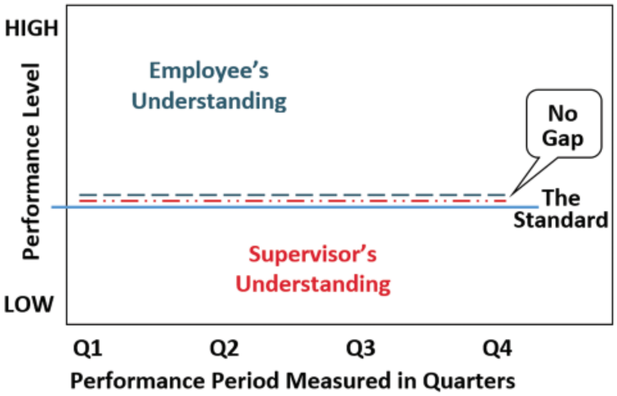
Closing the Gap

The supervisor should understand that the gap may never go away. There will always be some dissonance in an employee evaluation. Therefore, it is up to the supervisor to develop practices that increase the likelihood of closing the gap and reducing conflict.

Figure 3 represents perhaps the ideal state where the supervisor, employee, and the standard meet. Of course, for performance, the ideal state is where the supervisor and employee agree and the employee's performance is well above the standard. To help achieve that higher level of performance, the following is a list of beneficial actions a supervisor can take to improve performance evaluation experiences:

- Read the position description and ensure that it accurately reflects the work of the individual. If it doesn't,

Figure 3, Minimal – No Gap with Standard Line



work with human resources to revise the position description.

- Create a performance plan that is action and outcome-oriented. Identify satisfactory performance, as well as the characteristics of higher-level contributions, such as:
  - Autonomy – The ability to work independently or requiring little oversight when working on a project;
  - Discretion – The ability to discern information from a variety of sources;
  - Flexibility – The ability to function with a variety of inputs;
  - Problem-Solving – The ability to identify problems affecting the work and to suggest solutions; and,
  - Decision-Making – The ability to make good decisions on the aforementioned higher-level contributions or recommendations to a course of action or approach.
- Communicate with the employee periodically about their performance.
- Coach the employee on areas of difficulty when appropriate.
- Mentor the employee for professional development.
- Communicate expectations early and, if need be, often.
- Do not shy away from conflict. It is better to clarify expectations and resolve issues early than to allow them to fester.

Summary and Closing

Supervisory management is rewarding and challenging. It requires a calm demeanor and a steady approach. Like craft work, you must first master the fundamentals. Know what the position description says. Also, to be of any real value, a performance plan must provide for levels of performance. These levels of performance are the discussion points for an employee and a supervisor to understand where they are and where they intend to go. Any disagreement

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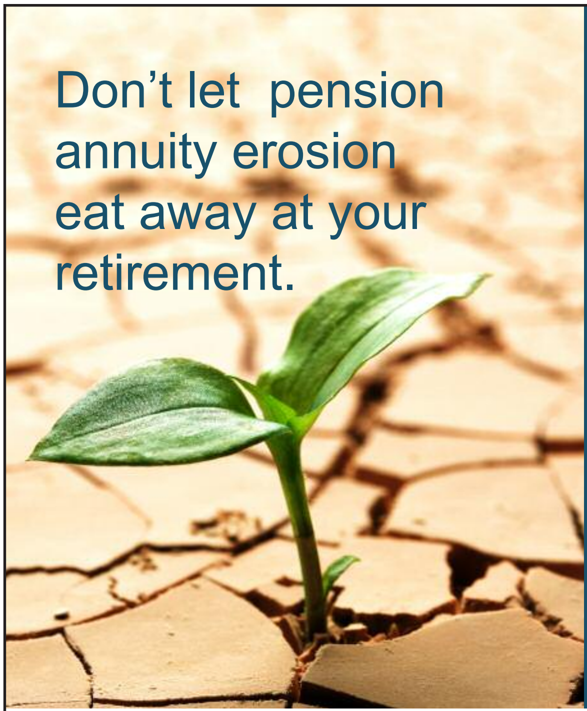
represents a gap; the wider the gap, the greater the disagreement on organizational contributions. Failing to address this gap will cause employee dissatisfaction, performance problems, and perhaps even complaints to human resources. Simple actions can be taken to reduce the gap.

Supervisory management is not a science. It must be actively engaged as it requires a different response for different employees. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, yet there are common actions that, when employed, can be useful to the supervisor and help make for a rewarding experience.

Finally, as a manager, why should you care? Our education and certifications prepare us to be proficient professionals, but do not prepare us for supervisory management. While we do have basic relationship skills, those skills do not necessarily translate well to the art of supervision. Professionals must not presume that success as a professional can seamlessly translate to success as a supervisor. The good news is that these skills and abilities can be acquired, practiced, and successfully used to manage an organization's greatest asset, its people. ■

James N. Phillips, Jr., MPA, has been supervisory manager for over 30 years serving with the US Air Force, US Navy, DOD, and Department of Veterans Affairs. He has written numerous articles on supervisory management, contract management, patient safety, and leadership and is a Doctoral Student at the American Meridian University. Jim currently works for the Department of Veterans Affair, Office Quality, Safety and Value, National Center for Patient Safety, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, as its Acquisition Chief.

> "There are common actions that, when employed, can be useful to the supervisor and help make for a rewarding experience."



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