

# Preparing for Academic Performance Appraisals

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The evaluation of faculty performance is one of the most frustrating and mismanaged tasks of college and university administrators. Communicating strengths and areas of improvement to highly educated, critically thinking professionals can be both challenging and intimidating. When performance is good, when superior and subordinates have an open relationship, when promotions or salary increases are abundant, when there is plenty of time for preparation and discussion--evaluations run smoothly. However, these conditions are rarely met in higher education, and the performance appraisal often becomes a stressful and negative interview. The purpose of this article is to help academic administrators transform the appraisal interview into a positive experience by highlighting the importance of advance preparation. The preparation process includes understanding career stages, determining evaluation and professional development goals, and coaching the faculty member in how to prepare.

## Career Stages

Faculty in different stages of their career have different needs and goals.

- *Establishment stage.* The establishment stage occurs when the faculty members first begin teaching. They may be as young as 25 or as old as 50, but they are novices when it comes to the work of the classroom. Characteristics of the establishment stage include uncertainty about competence and potential, dependence on others, exploration of classroom and career possibilities, and an understanding of learning capabilities.
- *Advancement stage.* Faculty with a little experience under their belts have moved into the advancement stage. They have reached a certain comfort level in the classroom and are discovering their research strengths. These faculty are independent contributors and autonomous performers who are beginning to clarify long-term career options.
- *Maintenance stage.* The third stage of career development is the maintenance stage. During this period, usually post-tenure, the faculty member comes to a plateau. He or she may hold on to career successes and be helpful to less experienced colleagues. However, dissatisfaction could start to set in during this period, and the faculty member may need redirection and new challenges.
- *Withdrawal.* The final stage, withdrawal, marks the ending of the faculty member's career. During this stage, faculty are preparing to leave. They may be letting go of organizational attachments while feeling a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment. These faculty make excellent mentors when used to impart knowledge and experience to colleagues.

The importance of understanding career stages has been virtually ignored in the faculty evaluation literature. Yet, without this understanding, it is impossible to develop viable evaluation and development goals.

## **Evaluation Goals**

The dean or department chair assesses past performance based on certain performance standards. Faculty are typically evaluated in three areas: teaching effectiveness, research and productivity, and service to the institution and community. The chair or dean should prepare evaluation criteria in advance and share these criteria with each faculty. The criteria must align with the institutional requirements and mission. According to Beer (1977), there are four purposes of the evaluation section of the appraisal:

1. To give feedback to subordinates so they know where they stand
2. To develop valid data for pay (salary and bonus) and promotion decisions and to provide a means of communicating those decisions
3. To help the chair/dean in making discharge and retention decisions
4. To provide a system for warning subordinates about poor performance

Preparation for the evaluation part of the interview should include gathering student and peer evaluation data, comparing the results to other faculty, reviewing research productivity reports, and assessing institutional and community involvement.

The evaluation part of the performance appraisal process usually receives the most emphasis; however, constructing professional development goals requires the most thought and has the greatest impact.

## **Development Goals**

The most important part of the interview involves constructing and implementing development goals. These goals include:

1. To counsel and coach subordinates so that they will improve their performance and develop their potential
2. To develop commitment to a larger organization through discussion of career opportunities and career planning
3. To motivate subordinates through recognition and support
4. To strengthen supervisor-subordinate relations
5. To diagnose individual and organizational problems

Determining development goals involves a process called performance mapping. Performance mapping stems from the path-goal theory of leadership. In the educational context, the chair or dean helps the faculty member determine professional goals for the future and maps a plan that guides the faculty member toward the determined goals.

Performance mapping also includes the development of an action plan. The action plan may be an actual map that includes time and budget considerations as well as subgoals and follow-up interview considerations. Motivating employees and providing the resources necessary for professional development are key components to a successful action plan. Even with limited resources, it is possible to help your departmental faculty improve substandard performance and continue to grow as academics.

When performance mapping, the chair or dean should be aware of issues that apply to career stages. For example, some faculty may need special encouragement for a research project, while others might need to attend a teaching conference. Goals must be realistic in the amount of time and energy that achieving the goal will require. The chair or dean must also be willing to provide the time and money resources needed to help the faculty member obtain his/her goal. Finally, the employee should always be involved in this process. The administrator's goals for the faculty member must be compatible with the faculty's personal goals. The administrator can use these goals as benchmarks for evaluation each year.

### **Preparing the Faculty Member**

Preparation for a successful performance appraisal is a thorough process. In addition to the administrator's preparation, the faculty member must also be encouraged to prepare. The chair or dean has the responsibility of coaching the faculty member for the interview. Too often faculty enter their evaluation interview unaware and unprepared. This only adds to the inherent anxiety and frustration that is experienced by both parties. There are several ways the evaluator can help the faculty member prepare.

One of the most effective tools is the self-evaluation. The self-evaluation has been used in the past as a developmental tool, but recently is gaining popularity for evaluation purposes as well. Having the faculty member complete a self-evaluation increases faculty ownership of the process, promotes dialogue, provides additional data points, and gives information not available through other channels.

The evaluator can also encourage faculty to keep complete and accurate records of their accomplishments throughout the year. The professional portfolio has gained popularity as a useful document that helps sell the faculty member during evaluations. The professional portfolio should include the following:

- Reflective statements describing teaching philosophy, strategies, and objectives
- Representative course syllabi
- Honors, awards, professional achievements
- A record of publications and presentations
- Student essays, creative work, field work reports, etc.
- Statements by alumni on the quality of instruction
- Student publications or conference presentations on course-related work
- Statements from colleagues who have observed classroom performance
- Student course and teaching evaluation data
- Information related to advising responsibilities

In addition to these documents, the faculty member should be encouraged to record one-year and five-year teaching and research goals. Often these goals will reflect what the faculty member perceives as his or her areas for improvement. Many evaluators find that when faculty members bring a self-evaluation and/or teaching portfolio to the interview, he or she has already pinpointed strengths and weaknesses and is willing to discuss them with the administrator. When there is advance preparation, the faculty member feels a sense of ownership in the process. And this feeling of ownership results in a more positive interview encounter.

Understanding the impact of career stages on the setting of evaluation and development goals and coaching the faculty the faculty member to prepare for the interview are crucial to successful evaluations. As Harold Mayfield (1960) writes, "Stripped to all jargon, the performance appraisal is simply an attempt to think clearly about each person's performance and future prospects against a background of the total work situation."

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