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Program and Employee Evaluation Techniques that Improve Performance and Minimize Risk

Employee evaluation is an essential element of a strong personnel management system that also includes position descriptions, effective hiring processes, comprehensive orientation programs, model employment contracts, fair compensation, and other personnel policies. Without all of these elements, personnel management becomes reactive versus proactive and subjects the manager and the department to the potential for significant internal conflict which could ultimately result in grievances or legal challenges. However, evaluation plays a particularly important role because it holds the promise of motivating employees to improve and more effectively contribute to organizational success.

Healthy Performance Evaluation Perspective

There is little doubt that if all employees are asked what they think about performance evaluation, the vast majority would say something negative. There are several reasons why people react negatively to being evaluated. Some of the more common reasons are as follows:

- Managers are basically uncomfortable in the evaluator's role, have a tendency to rush through the process, and do not accomplish specific objectives.
- Managers use evaluation in a punitive way to highlight weaknesses and demonstrate their own power.
- Employees are kept in the dark on what evaluation tools will be used, if any, and what will be measured until they walk into the evaluation meeting.
- Evaluation is purely subjective according to the ideas and inclinations of the manager.

The primary focus of performance evaluations should be a process that helps employees maximize their abilities, continue to grow in their positions, celebrate individual and collective program accomplishments, and address future professional development plans. Only the case where an employee refuses to listen to feedback, is resistant to change, is clearly a "bad fit" for the organization, or does something outside the boundaries of professional behavior, should performance evaluation be used as a way to create a case for separation of service. In fact, when a strong performance evaluation system is in place, one that is fair, well communicated, and provides employees with training and time to improve, most managers will rarely have to terminate anyone because ineffective employees will more

often seek and find another job before being fired. Of course, this does not apply to coaches with multi-year contracts who cannot resign while still retaining their "buy-out" package.

Performance Instruments

Similar to job descriptions, it is unlikely that any one evaluation instrument will be a perfect fit for a department. The athletics director needs to view a variety of approaches to performance evaluation from multiple perspectives: the overall athletics department, specific sport programs, specific support programs, individual staff members, and student-athletes and other stakeholders. Staff collaboration in the construction or revision of evaluation instruments is very important. When staff is permitted to discuss the reasonable performance indicators upon which they or their programs should be evaluated, it creates a level of buy-in for the process that may not happen as easily when senior managers construct the instruments in a vacuum. It is essential that evaluation be as objective as possible and that it not be just a casual conversation at the end of the year. The use of well constructed tools is essential and evaluation meetings that are well documented must take place.

Integrated Three Step Approach

Step 1: The Macro Program View. The macro view of performance evaluation focuses on the collective achievements of the staff at large and has four basic purposes:

- Serves as an internal assessment of athletics department mission and goal performance;
- Provides valid information for production of management reports that serve as "value-added" documents for university decision makers;
- Creates a platform to celebrate department achievements and "sell" the program to important constituents (faculty, recruits, alumni, media); and
- Creates motivational benchmarks for each staff member.

Every athletics director must create annual management documents that reflect how well the department performed that year. This collection of measurements also applies to individual performance. Collecting data pertaining to multiple measures such as team winning percentage, league, conference or national rankings, individual student-athlete awards, student-athlete academic performance, student-athlete satisfaction, coach awards, staff committee service and national, regional, local appearances as speakers or authors, injury data, press coverage, fund raising yields, community service projects, and other measurable performance indicators that can be directly tied to the mission, objectives or performance expectations of the department is essential. That data, when compiled and presented, serves the basic purposes listed above and creates a positive approach to the evaluation process.

There must be specific tools used to capture such program data. For example, "End of the Year Reports" should be required of all sport head coaches and support area program managers which ask for factual and quantifiable demonstration of achievements. Similarly all employees should be asked to reflect on the specific elements of their respective job descriptions as well as common elements relevant to all staff for the purpose of communicating factual and quantifiable achievements. Athletics personnel take part in so many activities that it would be impossible to have a total appreciation of accomplishments and areas that need attention without asking staff members themselves. Excerpts from these reports should be used to develop an athletics department year-end report.

Step 2: The Micro Individual Employee View. The micro view is a springboard from the collective accomplishments of the department described above to the specific skills, accomplishments, and

possible weaknesses of each individual employee. In essence, individual employee evaluations should accomplish the following:

- Serve as a tangible link to job descriptions and reinforcement of specific duties and expectations;
- Demonstrate that each individual has an important role in the department;
- Serve as a teaching tool to enhance employees' skills or improve on identified weaknesses; and
- Serve to protect employees from complaining parents, other constituents, or even a new supervisor.

An annual performance evaluation instrument should be used for every position within the athletics department. While the template is standard, each instrument should be customized to include the specific job expectations for that position which should be directly related to the departments stated performance objectives. Performance evaluations should be completely based on the responsibilities and expectations that are listed in the employee's job descriptions as well as specific action plan responsibilities for which the employee is directly responsible for executing. Each formalized annual evaluation performance assessment tool should also contain a standard section that clearly reflects the types of basic "team" conduct (i.e., respect for the performance and opinion of others, appropriate conflict resolution behavior, etc.) and compliance with institutional and department policies and procedures.

When a senior manager takes the time to sit down with individual employees to review all of the evaluation tools that are relevant to them, macro program as well as micro individual assessments, such process demonstrates a commitment to celebrate what employees have done well in addition to identifying areas for improvement while collaboratively inviting employee input on strategies to reach improvement goals. And, one of the least talked about but most important reasons for strong personnel evaluation systems is that they can ultimately serve to protect employees from individual constituents such as parents who complain about the competence of a coach or a support services staff member. When an athletic director is able to explain that the individual is evaluated on specific measures and has been evaluated very highly by a variety of constituent groups, such accusations are quickly diffused. In addition, a file full of positive evaluations can protect an employee from being terminated on the whim of a new senior manager or at the very least, put them in a position to negotiate an excellent separation of service package.

Step 3: Building Efficiency and Mitigating Risk. Performance evaluation should also include components that are focused on increasing efficiency and mitigating risk. These elements should serve to:

- Link department policy and procedures to completed staff work based on measurable key performance indicators;
- Identify potential problems or concerns early and take notification and corrective action in time to avoid crisis;
- Protect administrators from accusations of personal bias or wrongful termination through required documentation; and
- Turn most employee terminations into agreed upon resignations.

Every request for a year-end report should include a section that specifically asks the manager or employee if he or she is aware of any program component, facility, or practice that represents an area

that might expose the department to litigation, represents unnecessary or excessive costs or waste, or might be an area in which the department can improve efficiencies. When employees know that these areas will be reviewed annually, attention to the risk of litigation and efficiency based performance will increase throughout the year.

Another example of evaluation instruments that enhances efficiency are risk assessment checklists. Such instruments serve as reminders for staff to be alert to dangers or attend to common risks encountered in athletics programs, from equipment to facilities and event management. Each program area should be encouraged to design their own efficiency or mitigation of risk checklists to keep important duties or responsibilities from falling through the cracks.

Last, but equally important is the fact that objective performance based evaluation tools protect administrators from false claims that they have a personal bias against an employee or that they just don't like an employee. There must be fact-based measures and ongoing evaluation processes that counteract these types of claims. In addition, when evaluation procedures are strictly adhered to, methodical, and collaborative, many employees will leave a position well before the time comes to be terminated. Such tracking of poor performance not only helps employees make departure decisions, but also allows the rest of the staff to see that change and attrition are natural in any organization.

Addressing Deficiencies

When deficiencies are identified, clear processes should be established to correct them. Specifically, the following systems should be installed:

1. Probationary Period and Evaluation. There should be a minimum three-month initial probationary period for all paid personnel. Prior to and during this initial evaluation period, each employee should be appraised of job standards and performance expectations by their supervisor. The employee's immediate supervisor should be charged with the responsibility to insure that an orientation program checklist is completed at the front end of the period, the employee is regularly observed in their work setting and a timely end of probationary period evaluation is completed.

2. Performance Improvement Plans. Performance improvement should be informally and formally supported. Informal support or coaching/counseling is warranted for small corrections and improvements. Formal written performance improvement plans are necessary for on-going performance problems or serious deficiencies in job performance. Coaching and counseling by the employee's supervisor should be provided to support day-to-day work improvement. Any significant and/or repeated performance or behavioral issues that arise during coaching/counseling interactions should be documented with a memo in staff members' personnel files and a written performance improvement plan should include specific behaviors or performances in need of improvement, measurable outcomes for the improvement of these actions, and specific steps necessary for improvement. Department policy should make clear that the necessity for more than two performance improvement plans in a one-year period may be grounds for more serious corrective action, up to and including termination.

3. Corrective action. Corrective action, up to and including suspension, suspension without pay, and/or termination, may be taken for refusal to complete one's duties as assigned or for actions that violate athletics department, institution, conference, or NCAA or other athletics governance agency policies. Supervisors should be expected to use "progressive" corrective action to provide a fair and consistent method of addressing unsatisfactory performance or inappropriate behavior. When choosing the level

of corrective action appropriate for a deficiency, supervisors must consider the following: staff member's history of corrective actions, extent of violation in need of corrective action, and/or depth of harm resulting from the behavior in need of corrective action. When necessary for particularly egregious or harmful actions, supervisors may elect to use more severe levels of corrective actions. Each level of corrective action should be documented and these reports should be kept in the staff member's personnel files. Levels of corrective actions may be given in progressive order as follows:

- informal verbal warning'
- written warning
- final written warning
- suspension with pay
- suspension without pay
- termination

Any communication to the employee regarding necessary corrective action should contain the following elements: (1) reason for initiating corrective action, (2) documentation of the behavior in need of corrective action, (3) corrective steps for remedying the behavior in need of corrective action, (4) consequences for failure to remedy the behavior in need of corrective action, and (5) an invitation for staff member to request a meeting with the supervisor and/or athletics department Human Resources Director to discuss corrective action.

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