

Understanding and Managing the Anxiety Surrounding Performance Evaluations: Considerations for the Supervising Librarian

Richard McKay

“We can never do merely one thing,” biologist Garrett Hardin notes,¹ and this is as true for personnel management as it is for ecology. Formal performance evaluations are a familiar part of personnel management, and they are used in libraries for a variety of reasons. Ronald Moen’s 1989 article on performance appraisal is written for a business audience, but is relevant for libraries as well: “The most common uses of (performance appraisal) in industry are compensation, counseling, training and development, and since 1954, communicating company objectives. Most recently, PA has become a primary means of documentation for legal protection.”² If an understanding of the evaluation process stops there, though, one overlooks another important quality. Whatever their utility, and library literature dating to the 1980s suggests that this point is worthy of debate, performance evaluations also bring anxiety, to good performers as well as bad, and to supervisors as well as to their subordinates. Although this anxiety is a predictable as well as troublesome part of the evaluation process, the library literature on performance appraisal does little more than mention it, and never as a primary topic. The researcher is left with little guidance for understanding and managing a significant supervisory problem. This anxiety is worth whatever attention a library supervisor or director can devote to it. Certainly any evaluation process will involve anxiety to some degree, but not all of it is necessary. Some of this anxiety is a waste of energy, and this condition can be managed by an insightful supervisor.

Staff evaluation, it may be said with confidence, arouses anxiety on both sides of the supervisor’s desk. This situation is a familiar one in the wealth of magazine, newspaper, and

Internet writing on the subject. There is, however, little in the way of recent library-related scholarship on job evaluation that adds to the insight on anxiety already available to the researcher for some years. Sheila S. Intner's 2014 article on library performance reviews acknowledges their bad reputation among both supervisors and employees, and shows the importance of allowing librarians a voice in choosing the performance goals they will be measured against.³ Anne M. Turner's 1990 review of best practice in the appraisal of library support staff correctly identifies performance appraisal as a potentially infantilizing exercise fraught with chances at misunderstanding and disappointment.⁴ Each of these conditions carries with it a high potential for causing or worsening anxiety. Jonathan A. Lindsey begins the preface to his still useful *Performance Evaluation: A Management Basic for Librarians* (1986) by noting "Performance evaluation generates more anxiety in an organization than any other single event during the year."⁵ It is significant that he introduces anxiety as a topic of concern in the first sentence of his book, which contains a collection of articles and book chapters drawn from the professional literature of librarianship and management. Many of the reprinted articles identify anxiety as a taxing burden that accompanies the performance review. Lindsey's 1990 article on negotiation theory, conflict management, and assertiveness theory in performance evaluations begins with the observation "Performance evaluation time probably generates more conflict within an organization than any other annual activity."⁶

The anxiety generated by performance appraisals is mentioned in the literature of business and management, often as the logical product of a vexatious work environment. Conditions such as forced rankings, designed to weed subpar performers, can cause anxiety,⁷ and this may be expected to set the tone for performance appraisals in a company using them. Anxiety is often mentioned in library literature alongside a host of other unfortunate results of the performance appraisal package, including dread⁸ and defensiveness.⁹ It is widely acknowledged to be part of the evaluation process, but it is not studied to any depth. This important omission

affects the library supervisor's ability to respond well to its effects. With understanding, the supervisor can have this anxiety play a smaller role in the evaluation process.

Performance Management and Anxiety

Performance appraisal can easily awaken the uncertainty with which any employee might regard his or her relationship with persons in authority. This uncertainty can cause anxiety. David Rock is the director of the NeuroLeadership Institute, a company that studies the psychology of leadership. In a 2013 interview he explained the dynamics of this reaction: "(Managers) give lots of feedback to everyone else about what they should be doing better, and other people take that as a threat. People react to a performance review as if someone is saying your life is in danger. And the pushback is real. People will push back so intensely because they experience a strong (un)conscious threat response."¹⁰ Anxiety is a predictable consequence of working in a hierarchy, and an inextricable part of any evaluation process. It is all the more important to appreciate its power because supervisors, unless they have already thought carefully about it, may soft-pedal the role it plays in the evaluation process, and dismiss those affected by it as overly sensitive- or even difficult- employees. An alert supervisor can make the situation less problematic with careful attention to his or her dealings with subordinates, including being circumspect with communication. This is discussed later in this article.

The library supervisor should consider that commonly-accepted performance evaluation methods will not work well for many jobs. Librarianship itself may be one of the outliers. The numbering or counting of times that a job task was completed is certainly one of the easiest of these evaluation methods. But as often as quantification may be necessary to performance evaluation in general, it can also be a challenge to quantify the higher levels of library service in particular. This can easily cause anxiety in the librarian being evaluated. Reducing these higher level service points to quantifiable activities, or shoehorning more easily quantifiable but

inadequate substitutes in their place, may seem to the librarian little different from evaluating a marriage by the amount of popcorn the couple eats. That this might, on its face, be a valid criterion against which to judge marital happiness overlooks the ideas that unhappily-married couples might be vigorous eaters of popcorn, and that plenty of happily-married couples might eat no popcorn at all. In short, the relationship of the activity to the means used to measure it is, in this case, coincidence. In a situation where couples showing a popcorn-eating shortfall would be penalized for it in some important way, their negative reaction to this might be predicted with little difficulty. Similar dynamics apply to the workplace. The librarian performing with a high degree of satisfaction for all concerned will be liable to experience as stressful any attempt by a superior to link this with a quantifiable outcome that is not already obvious and acceptable to the librarian. This stress can breed anxiety.

Any complex job will naturally have a list of quantifiable component tasks, but reducing the job's evaluation to them at the expense of nuance and creativity invites employee dissatisfaction. This will be especially so among the more intelligent and capable of performers. W. Edwards Deming, in his 1982 classic *Out of the Crisis*, pronounces the reduction of evaluation criteria to countable goals an important business problem, noting "...people that are measured by counting are deprived of pride of workmanship."¹¹

Librarians are naturally vulnerable to this condition. Often, their best work is difficult to quantify without reducing it to an abstraction. Attempts to do so send a clear message that the workplace rewards the lower aspects of the profession at the expense of depth and mastery. For example, a reference librarian of wide experience and knowledge, who has a quick rapport with patrons and can bring them to a new understanding of their subject and the tools used to research it, might have one such exchange during a measurement period. Another librarian may only do a passable job during a reference transaction, but do it twice. In a workplace that evaluates

according to numbers the former librarian may easily feel that his or her contributions to patron success will be eclipsed by the numbers used to report them. Aluri and Reichel cite quantification as a problem in their 1994 article scrutinizing performance evaluation in the library.¹² Marjorie Johnson's 1972 survey of performance appraisal in academic libraries also shows the problematic nature of evaluating at least some library work by quantifiable criteria.¹³

The method of appraisal itself has structural aspects that can affect the evaluated librarian's experience of it. For instance, Daniel H. Pink, in his *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, reminds his readers often that much performance management relies on a carrot/stick model of reward and punishment that research suggests will not be effective for workers engaged in any but the more rote, repetitive, and non-creative of tasks.¹⁴ W. Edwards Deming says as much in his book, adding that "...the effect (of incentives) is exactly the opposite of what the words promise."¹⁵ It would be difficult to argue that the professional tasks of librarianship were similar to those of the assembly line. Librarians, however, will in large part be incentivized and rewarded by the widely-used, but questionably effective, carrot/stick evaluation model nonetheless. It falls to the supervising librarian to be aware of the unpleasant response this condition can cause, and take steps to lessen the response when this is possible.

Also, supervisors in libraries that manage performance appraisal with proprietary software should be aware that the software itself, in addition to performing the tasks it was designed for, can be confusing to employees, and can contribute to their perceived levels of anxiety. Performance appraisals are typically used at most only twice a year, at mid-year and at year's end, arguably not often enough to ensure speedy mastery by any but the more apt of users. Factor in an understandable employee reluctance to engage with the process in the first place, and it becomes all the more easy to see how problems with it might exist, even among employees already making useful contributions to the library. Confusing prompts or icons that would merely

puzzle an unstressed user can add greatly to the uncomfortable sense of incapacity an employee trying to use them under pressure can feel. It matters little whether or not this pressure is largely a product of the employee's misunderstanding of his or her relationship with the supervisor or the institution. It will still be experienced by the employee as distressing. It bears mentioning that an employee in this situation may be expected to share news of his or her troubles with peers. Also, an employee's good-faith difficulty using the project software can, with troubling ease, be framed by an out-of-humor supervisor as due to the employee's own ineptitude, or even as the result of a deliberate choice to be uncooperative, further alienating a perhaps already disaffected worker.

Managing Performance Management

Pink shows several times that autonomy, a chance at mastery, and a sense of purpose are effective motivators of intelligent and creative employees.¹⁶ Librarians of any stripe would certainly fit comfortably into that category. It follows that if incentives will be used, any performance incentive offered to the library staff should also allow them to experience as many of these three motivators as possible in order for the staff to recognize it as such.

One way of bringing these incentives into the library is for the supervisor to ask the employee to choose an activity that would at the same time enrich them and enable the library to fulfill one of its goals. Intner mentions this condition with approval twice in her article on librarians' performance reviews.¹⁷ The activity in question would be in addition to the librarian's core duties, and would have the advantage of adding value to the library, and of being enriching to the person performing them. As such, it will unlikely be felt by the librarian as a burden. The supervisor must take care, though, that the newly-assigned task complements rather than competes with the librarian's workday assignments. Aluri and Reichel rightly identify this condition as a source of possible problems before noting that librarians who do take on extra duties can often count on

being rewarded for their completion with a favorable performance rating that would otherwise be unavailable to them.¹⁸

As examples of possible desirable tasks the supervisor might consider, for instance, that a librarian in an academic library whose campus also has a child care center might read to children regularly. This librarian would be making a strong outreach to the campus community, and honing a valued skill into the bargain. A librarian with strong presentation skills, or one wanting to develop them, might speak before local civic clubs, or in the case of an academic library, to student clubs on some topic of interest. Librarians may work with adult literacy programs, or write a column in a small-circulation local newspaper, or in an academic library, the student newspaper. A librarian sending out to the community a monthly email or Facebook post chatting up new books, for instance, would be keeping the library and its services in the awareness of anyone reading it. Each of these enriching activities requires and exercises a professional skill and contributes to the welfare of the library. Each can add to a librarian's satisfaction with his or her job. Any one of them may also do much to offset feelings of anxiety that the librarian may have towards the evaluation process. Being qualitative rather than quantitative activities, their simple accomplishment will bring value. That the tasks can be accomplished again and again, and so might be quantifiable, is secondary to the actual accomplishment itself, although this may occur many times.

To re-engineer a supervisor's attitude towards job evaluation, it may be useful for the supervising librarian to think of his or her relationship with subordinates as one of a personal trainer to an athlete. The athlete will pay the personal trainer to lead him or her to a significant personal goal that would otherwise be unattainable. With this model the discomfort of training assumes a higher meaning than it would have otherwise, and becomes an instrument of enrichment voluntarily sought by the athlete. The athlete is an active and willing participant in any

transaction with the trainer. In the same way, a supervisor should be able to lead employees in activities that foster a growth in capacity and insight as a result of their completion. When the activities give the employee a chance at mastery, afford autonomy, and give a sense of purpose, the outcome should be agreeable for both employee and supervisor. The line that separates an attentive trainer from a taskmaster is not wide, though, and commonly-accepted performance management techniques per se will not help the supervisor stay consistently on the trainer side of the divide. This will require of the supervisor a degree of insight into the dynamics of his or her relationship with subordinates. It will also require compassion, to keep the imbalance in power these dynamics imply as benign as possible.

The supervisor can lessen the worst effects of performance management with thoughtful communication. The supervising librarian should assume that any downward communication from him or her stands an uncomfortably high chance of being misunderstood. This will be especially true during the back and forth messaging that accompanies mid-year and end-of-year evaluations, when an anxious mindset may predispose an employee towards an uncharitable interpretation of supervisory dicta. It is important to realize that communication from a superior is not the semantic equivalent of communication from a peer. A written remark or comment that a peer would accept without a second thought as, for instance, collegial whimsy, can be mistaken for ill-tempered sarcasm by an employee, or seen as revealing a hidden attitude. Supervisors should see to it that their communication to subordinates is worded to be unlikely to provoke feelings of unpleasant surprise or resentment. One way to ensure greater control over the reactions that communication can bring out in employees is to make it verbal rather than written when this is possible. Success with any communication, written or spoken assumes a degree of sensitivity in the supervising librarian. With verbal communication, the supervisor can gauge the effect of his or her words the instant they are spoken, explain them in terms that will make sense in context, and answer questions as they are aroused. This will give him or her a high level of

control over the reactions the words bring out in subordinates. Written communication should avoid the sort of humor or irony that otherwise would be unobjectionable when shared among peers. The supervisor might also consider giving extra thought when tempted to use imperatives such as the words important, required, must, ASAP; stilted legalisms (unless and until, cease and desist); military metaphors (chain of command, attack, target, trigger); and kindred expressions that may find their way into supervisory text. The supervisor might also consider that email sent with a read receipt can easily be mistaken by the addressees as an adversarial maneuver. All these may, under certain circumstances, appear threatening, and they can fan latent anxiety into a bothersome condition. The consequences of this misunderstanding are both preventable and worth avoiding.

Conclusion

It is plain enough that the performance evaluation is, like any powerful tool, a useful instrument that carries with it the possibility of trouble if it is not managed carefully. Again like any powerful tool, if it is used by a mindful and considerate operator, the chances of mishap diminish greatly. A good understanding of the conditions described in this paper and the remedial techniques it suggests will help to ensure supervising librarians that future performance appraisals shall carry as little additional baggage with them as possible.

Richard McKay (richard.mckay@sjcd.edu) has been the director of San Jacinto College's south campus library since 1992.

¹ Garrett Hardin, "To Trouble a Star: The Cost of Intervention in Nature," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 26, no. 1 (Jan. 1970): 17.

²Ronald D. Moen, "The Performance Appraisal System: Deming's Deadly Disease," *Quality Progress* 22, no. 11 (Nov. 1989): 62.

³Sheila S. Intner, "Librarians' Performance Reviews," *Technicalities* 34, no. 2 (Mar./Apr. 2014): 5.

⁴Anne M. Turner, "Appraising Support Staff: Not Just a Silly Paper Ritual," *Library Administration and Management* 4, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 181.

⁵Jonathan A. Lindsey, *Performance Evaluation: A Management Basic for Librarians* (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1986).

⁶Jonathan A. Lindsey, "Using Negotiation Theory, Conflict Management, and Assertiveness Theory in Performance Evaluation," *Library Administration and Management* 4, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 195.

⁷Jocelyn Berard, "Stop the Anxiety," *CA Magazine* 137, no. 10 (Dec. 2004): 27.

⁸Robert D. Stueart and Barbara B. Moran, *Library Management*, 3rd ed. (Littleton, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1987): 126.

⁹Charles A. Schwartz, "Performance Appraisal: Behavioralism and Its Discontents," *College and Research Libraries* 47 (Sept. 1986): 443.

¹⁰Adam Bryant, "A Boss's Challenge: Have Everyone Join the 'In' Group," *New York Times*, Mar. 23, 2013, U.S. Edition.

¹¹W. Edwards Deming, *Out of the Crisis*, (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Center for Advanced Engineering Study, 1982): 105.

¹²Rao Aluri and Mary Reichel, "Performance Evaluation: A Deadly Disease?," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 19, no. 4 (July 1994): 148.

¹³Marjorie Johnson, "Performance Appraisal of Librarians—A Survey," *College and Research Libraries* 33 (Sept.1972): 362.

¹⁴Daniel H. Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* (New York: Riverhead/Penguin, 2009). Pink takes a thoughtful look at this paradox in chapter 2, "Seven Reasons Why Carrots and Sticks (Often) Don't Work."

¹⁵Deming, *Out of the Crisis*, 102.

¹⁶Pink, *Drive*. In chapter 3, "Type I and Type X," Pink describes the work of psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, whose "self-determination theory" forms the basis for Pink's insights into autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

¹⁷Intner, "Librarians' Performance Reviews," 5.

¹⁸Aluri and Reichel, "Performance Evaluation," 148.

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