

Maximizing the Benefits of Employee Evaluations

By Nancy Byerly Jones

Employee evaluations are often scheduled in December to coordinate with holiday bonuses. Such timing, however, coincides with the stepped-up pace of our workloads generated by holiday activities and year-end tasks. This can mean rushed evaluation conferences. Or worse, employees may only receive a mere “Thanks for a good year” acknowledgment when handed their bonus checks.

Most of us struggle no time to spare and even more so during holiday seasons. Even if blessed with more than 24 hours each day, we would most likely still complain there is not enough time to accomplish all we’d like to do. As a result, we ignore or sweep aside those things that we consider lower priority. Our procrastination skills soar when it comes to putting off unpleasant tasks. And, a large number (if not majority) of supervisory personnel worldwide would most likely include employee evaluations as one of their most agonizing job responsibilities.

Has your office allowed employee evaluations to be swept aside or to fall into back burner/“get to some day” piles? Failing to do evaluations at all or rushing through the process, however, results in costly missed opportunities.

Our employees either help us succeed or fail. They are our intellectual capital, valued members of the team (or should be) and the heart and soul of the services we provide to our clients. Effective evaluation plans help protect and maximize our people and their day to day contributions to our firms and clients served. Evaluations offer long-term benefits to employers and employees alike when prepared for properly and when conducted thoughtfully and professionally.

It is critically important to have a comprehensive and well-thought out evaluation system and one that is not copied from a seminar manual or borrowed from another firm. They should be custom designed to meet your firm’s specific goals and needs, re-examined each year for any updates needed and used by all supervisors in a timely and consistent manner.

This month’s column is not intended to different evaluation systems. Rather, it is being written to offer readers a starter list of 25 tips (see below) on how to significantly increase the value of the evaluations themselves. By doing so, many “winners” emerge - employees, employers, clients and your bottom line. When designed and planned for your firm’s specific needs, employee evaluations will become worthwhile tasks on your to-do lists because of the ongoing benefits that result. Their risk of being ignored will diminish greatly. Our backburner piles, however, will not suffer one iota as there are always plenty of other “to do’s” we are willing and ready to heap upon them!

Employee Evaluations: A Starter List of Things to Consider

1. Prepare carefully ahead of time (Ask yourself, “What if I were the employee? Would I want my supervisor to care about my performance and future with the firm enough to plan for and take my evaluation seriously?”).
2. Create a flexible agenda for each evaluation allowing extra time if needed for unplanned topics or questions that may arise.
3. Schedule enough time for non-rushed, non-interrupted evaluation sessions.

4. Ask employees to share any questions, comments or concerns with you *before* the conference.
5. Have employees evaluate themselves *and* their supervisors and have them share this information at their evaluation conference.
6. Require all employee complaints to be submitted in writing and to include at least two proposed solutions for each concern; discuss during the evaluation.
7. Obtain positive input from employees' co-workers about employees being evaluated and share it with them with no names attached.
8. Before the conference, have employees complete a "Strengths/Weaknesses" survey about the firm (i.e. what's working, what's not, changes recommended) and discuss with them during the evaluation.
9. For negative feedback, give specific examples of poor job performance, bad habits, etc. and the effects thereof.
10. Use a "positive sandwich" approach (i.e. cushion the negatives with positive feedback).
11. Have another partner or manager at the evaluation if possible and at the very least for any discussions regarding tougher issues such as sexual harassment.
12. Don't rush through the conference...your undivided attention is a MUST!
13. Listen – really LISTEN!
14. If history has shown that an employee tends to shed tears easily, is belligerent or sarcastic, unusually timid, etc., plan accordingly. Seek out appropriate resources to assist you in preparing for and/or conducting the evaluation so that you are not surprised by any potential awkward situations should they occur.
15. Discuss general reminders with everyone (e.g. safeguarding confidentiality, handling difficult clients, resolving conflict with co-workers, etc.)
16. Ask what training or continuing education opportunities would be helpful; find out what prior training helped, what didn't and why.
17. Ask what they could teach their co-workers (e.g. ideas learned from a recent seminar, word processing or case management software tips).
18. Ask for their ideas on how to reward extraordinary performance in addition to cash bonuses.
19. Explore what systems, people or procedures help reduce their workplace stress and what things/people make their work harder to do.
20. Consider creating employee action plans for the year ahead (contact Nancy for a sample form: nbj@nbjconsulting.com)
21. Document and sign evaluation conference memos, let employees review, discuss any questions about it and sign the finalized version.
22. No longer than one week post-evaluation, follow up with employees to ask if they have any leftover questions or comments.
23. Schedule follow up meeting(s) if needed.
24. Monitor employees' progress post-evaluation and promptly call their attention to anything not being done as agreed, offer timely praise when employee improvements occur and if appropriate, hold quarterly mini-evaluations.
25. Study information gained from all employee evaluations and take appropriate and timely steps to make improvements and changes where warranted.

A slightly different version of this article was written for publication by Lawyers USA in 2007. Attorney Nancy Byerly Jones enjoys a career as an office management solutions consultant/coach for law firms and businesses. She also serves as a certified mediator with an emphasis on law office partner disputes and family law. For more information, please visit her website at www.nbjconsulting.com or contact her at nbj@nbjconsulting.com.