

**Performance Appraisals within Public Safety**

by

**Linda A. Sandleben**

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Dedicated to my Mother & Father, Jane & Joe, for all of the support and confidence they have had in me during my studies.

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## Performance Appraisals within Public Safety

## Chapter I

Introduction

Relative to other promotion methods, promotability ratings are seldom used in public safety organizations, despite their potential validity and low cost. To provide information for promotion decisions to fill higher positions in a state patrol agency, peer and higher-officer ratings and nominations were obtained for 60 lieutenants through majors. Results indicated this evaluation process was reliable and valid, providing sufficient variance for administrative decisions. Most participants were accepting of the process and results. Subsequent promotions have generally reflected the results. Sources of resistance to promotability ratings are discussed and suggestions made for dealing with this resistance. <sup>1</sup>

Public safety organizations have long used a variety of formal methods to determine promotion of officers, most often including written examinations, oral interviews, and assessment centers. One method that has seldom been used is promotability ratings, ratings of how well the officer will likely perform at the next level. A 2000 survey of 149 city, county, and state police organizations found that only 6 percent of these organizations used promotability ratings for promotion to sergeant through captain, whereas 90 percent used written exams,

44 percent used oral interviews, and 32 percent used assessment centers. <sup>2</sup>

In recent years, assessment centers have increasingly been used for promotions, and abundant research has conclusively demonstrated their validity. However, a recent meta-analysis of the comparative validities of promotional methods used in a variety of industrial and governmental organizations found that peer and supervisor ratings were slightly more valid predictors of future job performance than assessment centers. Also, peer and supervisor are more quickly and inexpensively obtained than developing and conducting an assessment center. Thus peer and supervisor ratings would seem to warrant more use for promotion in public safety organizations than they are currently receiving.

In the traditional performance appraisal process at the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), supervisors and subordinates develop a work plan at the beginning of the performance cycle, the subordinate carries out the work plan, the supervisor provides a midcycle review, and, at the end of the cycle, the supervisor provides feedback indicating how well the subordinate has fulfilled his or her work plan. However, with an increased emphasis on Total Quality Management (TQM), teamwork, and customer service, the supervisor may not have all

of the information needed to provide complete and accurate feedback to the subordinate. <sup>6</sup>

If the individual is a manager who supervises others, these subordinates may be the best source of information on delegation, communication, and leadership skills. Peers may be in the best position to provide feedback on skills such as working with others, decision-making and technical capability. Finally, customers may be the best source of input on quality of work and service orientation. For these reasons, many organizations in the private and public sectors are incorporating information collected from multiple sources (supervisors, subordinates, peers, and customers) into the performance appraisal process.

This fact was recognized by a group of Career Entry Group (CEG) executives within OPM who asked the Office of Personnel Research and Development (PRD) to draft a proposal for incorporating subordinate, peer, and customer feedback into CEG's performance appraisal process. This paper presents the recommendations that were made for incorporating other sources of feedback into the performance appraisal process. The goal of the project was to improve the quality of information CEG employees receive about their job performance and, ultimately, to enhance the quality culture and level of employee involvement within CEG. <sup>5</sup>

The next section outlines, in more detail, the research process used to develop the recommendations, and is followed by a brief description of the current performance appraisal process used in CEG. Recommendations are presented in the final section of the paper. The paper also contains two appendices that provide more detail on the information collected from the research literature and from interviews with individuals in other public and private sector organizations.

A distinction is made here between peer/supervisor ratings of job performance, and peer/supervisor ratings of promotability. The latter are ratings of individuals' likelihood of performing well in higher-level jobs, based on their current performance on job dimensions which are important in higher-level jobs. The focus of promotability ratings is somewhat different than ratings strictly of current job performance, and arguably more valid to the extent that the higher-level jobs differ from the current level jobs. This would particularly be the case in moving from a basic officer level to the sergeant or first-line supervisor position, but also in moving from a supervisor position to a higher-level management position, typically involving more administrative and planning responsibilities. This article will describe the use of promotability ratings in a law enforcement agency, and will discuss several issues involved implementing this method. <sup>3</sup>

Personnel managers at public safety organizations play a key role in developing and implementing personnel policies and practices. While their influence varies from municipality to municipality and from issue to issue, the municipal personnel manager is an important source of expertise and knowledge concerning most human resource management issues.(1) A very important responsibility for many personnelists is performance appraisal system in public safety organization design and implementation. Performance appraisal is one of the most widely employed tools and is used for a variety of developmental and administrative purposes.(2) Performance appraisal is, however, a complex process and the center of considerable controversy over its utility and effectiveness. 21

Proponents of Total Quality Management and other critics argue that individual performance appraisal engenders dysfunctional employee conflict, assumes a false degree of measurement accuracy, underemphasizes the importance of the work group in facilitating effective performance, assigns an inordinate amount of responsibility for poor performance to the individual employee, assumes the role of a hierarchical command and control device, and is subject to a whole host of heuristical and attributional errors.(3) A discussion of the merits of these critiques is beyond the scope of this article, but for those who value performance appraisal, this study is

predicated on the belief that a properly designed appraisal system that is congruent with organizational culture can make an important contribution to organizational effectiveness.(4)

There are many rules, regulations, and guidelines associated with the performance appraisal process in the public safety organizations. Although most of them had no bearing on this project, a few key regulations could have potentially impacted how subordinate, peer, and customer feedback are incorporated into the performance appraisal system in CEG. For example, the final rating for each employee must come from one rating official. In addition, performance plans and ratings must be reviewed and approved by a higher level official for some employees. Finally, in some cases, performance elements and standards must be reviewed and approved by the union. <sup>46</sup>

It should be noted that the current performance appraisal process did not specifically call for subordinate, peer, or customer feedback to be taken into consideration when rating an employee. However, there was nothing in the regulations that prevented rating officials from collecting and considering this information when developing their final ratings. In fact, OPM guidance encourages managers to use additional information in the development of performance appraisal ratings.

Proponents of performance appraisal claim that an effective performance appraisal system in public safety organization

produces specific performance feedback to improve employee performance, identifies employee training requirements, and links performance and personnel decision making.(5) The ultimate goal of most performance appraisal system in public safety organizations is to increase employee motivation and productivity. The recent research literature has begun to identify the characteristics of effective performance appraisal system in public safety organizations.(6)

Performance appraisal systems are an important tool of personnel management, but not all municipalities utilize this technique. The study analyzed the major reasons why public safety do not implement a formal performance appraisal system. The data was derived from a national sample of public safety personnel officers. The results indicate that the most important barriers were a lack of expertise in performance appraisal and insufficient resources to adequately support a system. <sup>50</sup>

Discriminate analysis showed that western and southern cities were more likely to utilize an appraisal system, while eastern cities were least likely. Other significant variables associated with existence of a performance appraisal system were a favorable labor relations climate and lower turnover rates. Implications for development of a performance appraisal system are discussed.

Performance appraisal is an important tool of personnel management. The evaluation of employee performance is an ubiquitous process that occurs both formally and informally, irrespective of the existence of a formal performance appraisal system. Performance appraisal has had a controversial history with both strong proponents and detractors. Opponents argue that traditional individual performance appraisal assumes a false degree of measurement accuracy, ignores and devalues group performance, has a built-in conflict between employee evaluation and counseling, and engenders dysfunctional conflict and competition. Supporters argue that employees believe that personnel decision making should be based upon performance, that employees actively seek diagnostic and evaluative performance feedback, assert that performance can be measured accurately on some jobs, observe that jobs vary on whether performance is a product of an individual or a group and that greater employee participation can mitigate the conflict and defensiveness of traditional performance appraisal. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze these arguments in detail, except to state that there is considerable merit on both sides. It is clear that an organization can operate with or without a formal performance appraisal system. A survey by Roberts (2000) found that approximately one in four public safetys do not operate a formal performance appraisal system while Daley (2001) found

that one-sixth of North Carolina municipalities have no formal system.<sup>28</sup>

There has been little or no research devoted to studying the factors that influence the decision of a municipality to implement a performance appraisal system. There have been a number of recent surveys of public safety performance appraisal systems. None of these surveys have reported data on the number of municipalities that do not have an appraisal system and the reasons why. This article will explore some of the explanations offered as to why public safety organizations choose not to deploy a system and to identify the variables that statistically discriminate between municipalities that have systems versus those that do not.<sup>9</sup>

### Objective Of The Study

The primary objective of this study is to determine whether practicing personnelists and research scholars agree on what constitutes an effective performance appraisal system in public safety organization. If Personnel managers at public safety organization possess knowledge of the characteristics of effective performance appraisal system in public safety organizations, they are more likely to design and/or advocate performance appraisal system in public safety organizations that include these important attributes. In addition, the research is

an opportunity for the academic community to learn from the experience of practitioners. Concepts and techniques that are valued by academics may not be functional or effective for those involved in the development and administration of performance appraisal system in public safety organizations. Thus, areas of disagreement can serve to identify subjects for further research and improve both theory and practice.

#### Importance Of The Study

Research of this genre is also necessary because much performance appraisal research is laboratory based with consequent questionable external validity. This research and other recent works attempt to delineate the contextual factors that affect the operation of performance appraisal system in public safety organizations.

Given the multitude of variables that can influence the development and administration of a performance appraisal system in public safety organization, personnel manager knowledge alone cannot be expected to have a significant impact on a given systems' effectiveness. Knowledge of the elements of an effective system is a necessary, albeit not a sufficient, condition to ensure performance appraisal system in public safety organization effectiveness.

How can Personnel managers at public safety organizations develop their knowledge of effective appraisal system practices? Formal education is one avenue. Personnel managers at public safety organization with advanced degrees specializing in personnel areas are more likely to be cognizant of the requirements for effective performance appraisal system in public safety organizations. Knowledge about performance appraisal can be obtained through specialized courses and training seminars, membership in professional associations, and self-study of the performance appraisal literature. Finally, practical knowledge gained from direct experience with performance appraisal is likely to be extremely important, if not the most important, influence. <sup>12</sup>

There are no published works that compare the opinions of personnelists with views of research scholars on the attributes of an effective performance appraisal system in public safety organization. Most of the published works have been descriptive or case study oriented and have not addressed the full-range of attributes related to appraisal system success.(7)

### Options for the Appraisal

#### 1. Annual Job Performance Appraisals

In effect for many years, these appraisals guarantee communication between the superior and subordinate regarding the

subordinate's performance. However, they are very limited for comparing many individuals due to the highly questionable reliability of ratings by only one rater (the immediate supervisor) for each officer.

## 2. Assessment Centers

On two occasions in the past ten years, lieutenants and above of the WSP have been appraised by an assessment center. However, the assessment centers were found to be expensive; reactions of the participants were less than enthusiastic; and participants did not feel that the results of the assessment center were used in making promotion decisions. For these reasons, there was little support for another assessment center.

## 3. Promotability Ratings

Both higher-ranking officers and peers are in an excellent position to evaluate the promotability of officers. In addition to the immediate supervisor, other higher-ranking officers are naturally observing officers' performance in a variety of forms - e.g., written reports, officers' judgment and thinking in planning sessions, and their interaction with other employees. Traditionally, higher officers would be expected to rate lower-ranking officers' promotability. One police promotability ratings process, using higher-ranking raters, has been described by Scott (2001), and a similar process for a fire department has been reported by Davidson (1999). <sup>19</sup>

### The Problem

Two years ago, the Washington State Patrol (WSP) was faced with the likelihood that several higher-ranked individuals (captains and above) would retire in the next 12 to 24 months, requiring promotion of lower-ranked individuals to fill the higher positions. The Chief of the WSP has the authority to promote lieutenants and above as he sees fit, and traditionally, the Chief has made these promotion decisions based on his own knowledge of eligible individuals. However, it was felt that a systematic evaluation of the promotability of individual lieutenants and above could assist the Chief in making these promotion decisions, as well as decisions about the training/development of individual officers.

In this agency, promotion of troopers and sergeants is determined by a thorough, systematic appraisal of these officers' capabilities for handling higher positions. For sergeants, this appraisal consists of written examinations, an oral examination, a scored resume, command ratings, and forced choice evaluations of promotional potential, with each of these components weighted according to state statute. Thus, the WSP routinely used and has been accustomed to formal, systematic appraisals for promotion of lower-ranked individuals, but not for promotion of mid-level and higher-ranked individuals. A

formal system was not to be developed for appraising the promotability of 35 lieutenants, 19 captains, and 6 majors.

### Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: Breadth of knowledge will be positively related to safety performance.

Hypothesis 2: Depth of knowledge and skill will be positively related to safety performance.

Hypothesis 3: Depth of knowledge and skill will be more strongly related to safety performance than breadth of knowledge.

## Chapter II

Literature Review

Peers are also a potential source of promotability ratings. Peers are aware of the demands of higher-level positions and usually view each other in more familiar light, and in different work situations, than those observed by higher officers. Peer ratings have seldom been used in law enforcement agencies. A 2001 WSP survey of state police agencies' promotion methods found no state using peer ratings. However, reviews of research on the use and validity of peer ratings in mainly military and industry settings have been very positive. One of the few studies of peer ratings in a law enforcement agency found peer ratings (conducted for research purposes) correlated significantly with assessment center results for sergeants ( $r=.45$ ) and lieutenants ( $r=.74$ ).<sup>25</sup>

It was felt that obtaining and combining higher-officer and peer ratings would be useful for several reasons: providing a larger number of raters and, therefore, more reliable measures, combining different perspectives of performance; and allowing one source of ratings to offset possible bias in the other source. There was precedent within the WSP for using both supervisor and peer ratings: both have been routinely obtained to effectively validate the evaluation system used to promote

troopers and sergeants, and command ratings are a small, but well-accepted component in the promotion of sergeants.

It was therefore decided to the higher-officer and peer ratings for this evaluation of mid-level and higher officers, due to the precedent of satisfactory prior use of higher-officer ratings for promotion of lower-rank officers in the organization, the demonstrated validity of peer ratings in other settings, anticipated high reliability due to combining higher-officer and peer ratings, and the practical advantages of obtaining these ratings quickly and at low cost. The effectiveness of the process was to be evaluated by the dispersion of ratings, the ratings' reliability and validity, participants' reactions, and practical use of the ratings. <sup>47</sup>

There are a number of reasons why a public safety would not deploy a performance appraisal system. A performance appraisal system requires a considerable investment in time, energy, and fiscal resources. For example, an effective system requires that specific performance standards, the rating form, administrative procedures and performance goals be developed. It is essential that raters are trained and employees oriented. Effective documentation of performance requires a considerable amount of the rater's time. The burdens on raters are exacerbated when supervisors rate large numbers of employees, lack the expertise to rate employee performance, or are unable to observe a

representative sample of employee performance. A complete performance appraisal program requires a systematic evaluation by analyzing the reliability and validity of performance ratings to identify biased or substandard raters. It requires a careful assessment of user attitudes to identify specific problem areas. All of these steps demand a considerable investment, an investment that many governments may be unable or unwilling to make. <sup>75</sup>

A second factor that could impede the development of a performance appraisal system is a lack of expertise. The performance appraisal process is an extremely complex set of tasks that requires specialized knowledge in psychometrics, performance measurement, and highly developed interpersonal skills including the provision of positive and negative feedback. It requires cognizance of the cognitive process underlying performance appraisal including how raters process information and the preferred method (diary keeping) for maintaining comprehensive documentation (Ilgen & Feldman, 2001; Greenberg, 2000). Personnel managers may lack the expertise necessary to design an effective system and outside consultants are expensive, hence the lack of expertise may dissuade a municipality from developing a performance appraisal system. <sup>104</sup>

A third factor may be union opposition. Unions traditionally have emphasized seniority as the preferred basis

for personnel decision making. Seniority is established on the assumption that experienced workers are more proficient and productive. It also emphasizes rewards for loyalty based upon years of service. Seniority is promoted by unions because they distrust management's ability or motivation to make unbiased performance ratings and personnel decisions.

Upper-level support and commitment is essential for the success of most managerial innovations. If the city manager, council or mayor opposes the concept or practice of performance assessment, it is unlikely that a performance appraisal system will be adopted. Upper-level support in performance appraisal requires an investment of resources, tangible and symbolic support of the concept, and evaluating raters on how well they administer the process. <sup>175</sup>

The final two explanations involve user attitudes toward performance appraisal, especially acceptance. In order for any appraisal system to be effective, both raters and ratees must accept the system. Employees may resist performance appraisal for a variety of reasons. <sup>132</sup> They include a lack of objective performance measures, the inability to assess individual performance because the work process is group oriented, perceived supervisor bias (i.e., by race, sex, affective orientation, politics), value conflict (i.e., performance rating should be for counseling purposes only) and a perceived lack of

utility. Perceptions of a lack of utility occur frequently in situations where personnel decisions are made mostly by seniority. Thus, the expectancy that performance and rewards will be linked is low or zero, hence performance appraisal may not motivate behavior. <sup>168</sup>

Within the management and organizational behavior literatures, the linkage between organizational practices and individual performance is generally conceptualized and studied as follows: Societal and organizationally espoused values will engender particular types of general and human resource management practices. <sup>125</sup> These management practices will in turn influence employee attitudes, perceptions of the work environment, and knowledge and skill acquisition; ultimately, these latter individual difference variables will directly impact individual performance. In these literatures, individual performance is most often viewed as synonymous with the actions that employees engage in or display. Although decades of theory and research have been devoted to conceptualizing and measuring antecedents of individual performance, individual performance as a construct domain has received very little theoretical attention or research. <sup>186</sup> Without a clearer understanding of the substantive dimensionality of individual performance--arguably the most critical individual difference domain in organizational behavior and human resource management--the study of predictors

and casual models of individual performance will remain enigmatic.

Although there have been numerous calls over the last 50 years to spend as much time and energy theorizing and studying individual performance criteria as has been spent on the predictor side, we have only recently begun to understand how broadly defined individual performance should be for the purpose of studying predictor-criterion relationships.<sup>191</sup> Evidence from recent decades of validity generalization/meta-analysis research and several large scale selection test validation studies suggest that it is primarily at relatively broad analytic levels (i.e., with respect to broad groupings of jobs or job families) that we should expect certain individual attributes (i.e., cognitive abilities and personality variables) to differentially relate to individual performance. That is, the available empirical evidence indicates that theorizing and studying the dimensionality of job performance with respect to specific jobs or positions (for the subsequent purpose of examining individual antecedents of job performance) may not always be necessary. A viable conclusion is that general or generic modeling of the dimensionality of performance within a performance domain may be appropriate for both scientific and practice concerns.<sup>135</sup>