

Recommendation xx: MPD should reinstitute an officer performance evaluation system that collects and incentivizes progressive policing activity. [OIR 105]

Discussion: Employee performance evaluation provides a means to document and enhance employee performance. Such a process is key to accountability, employee incentivization and motivation, and effective management. It is essential for shaping employee activities to align with organizational objectives – in the case of MPD, objectives such as increased use of problem-oriented policing practices and adherence to community-policing ideals.

Research clearly shows that a well-designed performance evaluation system can greatly improve employee performance. However, various traditional performance evaluation systems have been legitimately criticized. Poorly constructed performance evaluation systems can devolve into unpleasant formulaic rituals, demotivate employees with negative feedback, build fear, and undermine teamwork. Moreover, as W. Edwards Deming and others in the quality movement have noted, poor quality is often a function of system breakdowns, not individual failures. But concentrating solely on system problems to the exclusion of human problems can lead to seriously defective people management procedures.

Given Deming's critiques, MPD began experimenting with alternative performance evaluation processes in the 1980s. Until several years ago, a "goal setting" approach was used, but some supervisors did not document the process well enough for it to be meaningful and useful. MPD then abandoned written performance evaluations altogether, leaving only "supervision by walking around," where supervisors are supposed to provide employees with guidance as appropriate on an ongoing basis. As OIR notes: "the process does not require any regular and written assessment of the employee's performance. As a result, there is no current requirement for a supervisor to record the performance of a competently functioning employee."

As OIR discusses in its report, developing a good performance evaluation system for police officers can be challenging. Supervisors have disincentives to distinguish among employees – as OIR observes, "it is most convenient to issue evaluations whereby 'everyone gets an A.'" And it can be difficult to develop criteria that are fair and objective, and not merely a reflection of the relationship between the officer and evaluator. Moreover, both OIR and MPD correctly note that some "objective" criteria – such as number of stops, citations, or arrests – can incentivize conduct completely inconsistent with principles of progressive policing.

But, as OIR further notes:

The challenges of devising effective evaluative processes, however, has not, in our experience, ever led to MPD's current model of essentially abandoning them. One problem with the elimination of the documented performance evaluation process is that it entirely does away with one device through which a police agency can impact officer performance. For example, if an evaluative process made it clear to officers that a key metric of their performance would be the degree to which they deployed problem-solving techniques in their daily activity, or implemented de-escalation strategies in dealing with combative subjects, the performance evaluation system could be used to incentivize officers to use these tools more frequently. Moreover, a performance evaluation system setting out such goals requires supervisors to devise ways to identify such activity, which can lead to more effective and engaged supervision.

A police agency without a performance evaluation system gives up a potentially valuable device to impact officer performance individually and Department culture systemically.

This recommendation integrates closely with other of our recommendations – including: recommendations aa [OIR 38], bb [OIR 39], and cc [OIR 47] (documenting officer activities, particularly problem-oriented policing activities, through logs or other comparable methods); recommendations dd [OIR 30], ee [OIR 41], and ff [OIR 51] (obtaining community input on performance of officers assigned to various specialized units); and recommendation gg [OIR 40] (developing evaluative metrics for neighborhood officers in conjunction with neighborhoods). Collectively, they articulate a comprehensive vision whereby data and input are obtained as a basis for performance evaluation, allowing accountability and incentivization of progressive policing activities in accordance with community policing ideals.

A great deal of empirical research has been conducted on performance management. MPD could potentially benefit from implementing evidence-based practices in the domain of performance evaluation. Evidence-based measures include goal setting with frequent feedback/coaching, the use of behavioral and learning goals for complex tasks (rather than merely output goals), and a focus on building strengths (rather than a deficit orientation with negative feedback).¹ It may be productive to view performance evaluation as predominantly a development tool.² In addition, the U.S. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services recently published an executive guidebook for performance management in community policing organizations.³ It recommends a procedural-justice-infused approach to performance management, and MPD might find some of its suggestions of value.

In its response to the OIR report, MPD stated: “In 2016, MPD identified re-instituting some type of employee performance evaluation or more formalized feedback mechanism as a department goal (as part of the MPD’s equitable workforce plan). Since then, the department has been taking incremental steps towards this end. Last year, the department worked to identify software to assist with the process. We anticipate establishing a work group in 2018 to iron out details of a more formalized process for employee feedback and coaching, with a goal of implementation in 2019. The precise makeup of this process is yet to be defined. The OIR report highlights some of the many shortcomings of traditional performance evaluations, and MPD will strive to implement a process that is meaningful and productive.” And in its November 2018 update MPD stated: “The department has also been continuing to move forward with exploring a performance evaluation/employee feedback process; we hope to implement a process in mid to late 2019.” The Ad Hoc Committee fully endorses this OIR recommendation, recognizing it as crucial to accountability and the goal of furthering use of progressive policing practices.

¹ Gifford, J. (2016) *Could do better? Assessing what works in performance management*. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. Retrieved from <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/people/performance/what-works-in-performance-management-report>

² Moran, M. (2013) Making the appraisal process more constructive. *HR Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/article-details/making-the-appraisal-process-more-constructive>

³ Branly, S., Luna, A., Mostyn, S., Schnitzer, S., & Wyoff, M.A. (2015) *Implementing a Comprehensive Performance Management Approach in Community Policing Organizations: an Executive Guidebook*. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.