

Staff appraisals

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When volunteers evaluate professionals

Many voluntary association executive committees also have dealings with (employed) staff. They employ specialists or support staff and are responsible for them, which is no easy task, especially when you consider that, as volunteers, they are undertaking this job with limited time and no compensation.

Daniela Vogt Fischer (DV), Dipl. Psych. IAP (psychologist), acting volunteer president of two large nurseries and former president of the Schlupfhuus Zürich social services organisation, talks to Andrea Kürsteiner (AK), a personnel and management expert with many years of voluntary service under her belt.

DV: The people on the executive committee who are responsible for staff matters are rarely present on site. How can they evaluate the work of management (e.g. the head of a nursery) if they do not have any direct insights into their performance? How can they get an idea of their work without staff feeling like they are being spied on?

AK: The purpose of staff appraisals is essentially to promote the staff member's and ultimately the organisation's development. The key components of a personal development review are

- A self-assessment by the staff member
- An external assessment (including an assessment by the executive committee)
- A comparison of the self-assessment and external assessment
- The overall evaluation
- Feedback from staff to the line manager
- Steps for further development

Feedback is always subjective and should also be declared as such. However, it is important to be able to support these assessments and evaluations with specific examples.

Even if executive committee members are rarely present on site, this doesn't mean that they never are. They still have somewhat of an insight or need to create some form of access for themselves; for example, by meeting management in the nursery during a visit or talking to staff members. Contact with customers is also important, in this case the parents. In a nursery, the executive committee member responsible will also naturally take part in parents' events and attend joint events.

It is therefore important to consider how facts can be gathered. These intentions must be made transparent and the procedure agreed and scheduled with the staff member in question. If there are no observations by the executive committee or feedback from parents, e.g. no data or facts, there's no point in conducting a performance assessment.

DV: The legitimacy of the executive committee members and their ability to perform this role are often called into question by the professionals (staff members) because, as volunteers, they do not have any job-specific knowledge. Under these circumstances, would it make sense for the executive committee to create a professional appraisal standard?

AK: I think it's important that executive committees that provide appraisals ensure that they themselves are up to scratch (e.g. train themselves) to hold professional personal development reviews. Staff know quickly whether they are being evaluated competently – and a competent evaluation is the only way for executive committees to gain acceptance. Personal development reviews should be well prepared and planned, and the key is ensuring transparency at each stage of the talk (before, during and after).

It's important to have criteria against which the person being evaluated (whether they are employed or working voluntarily) will be measured, and to set these criteria together before any performance or conduct review takes place. By setting these criteria together, this will help to create a relationship built on trust and mean that the line manager is more likely to be accepted.

Agreed objectives should be measurable, achievable and verifiable, and must therefore be formulated as precisely and specifically as possible. The following documents may come in handy here: mission statement, job or function description.

DV: How are such indicators developed?

AK: Developing standards, guiding principles and/or indicators is a complex and challenging process, especially at the beginning. I recommend involving the relevant people in the process (executive committee, managers, individual staff members) and potentially seeking support from an external expert. There is also useful literature on this subject, as well as standards already in place that have been developed by similar organisations.

DV: What type of information does it make sense to gather for the performance review? Can you also use information that you hear from others?

AK: It's important to only use observations, data, facts and feedback that are directly related to the duties of the person being evaluated and the agreed annual objectives.

Where relevant, information that you hear may be used. I recommend verifying individual statements. It should also be made clear that it is third-party information.

DV: In terms of the performance of the head of the nursery, is it possible to survey staff?

AK: Staff surveys are a key quality assurance tool and important information source within organisations. Various aspects are covered in comprehensive anonymous surveys. Satisfaction with management is one of them.

If individual staff members are surveyed in a targeted and personal way, this procedure needs to be discussed with the manager. A personal survey should be specified as such and planned in agreement with the manager to be evaluated.

DV: What are the most important areas to review and evaluate?

AK: That depends on the function, tasks, standards and objectives. In general, the following aspects need to be checked:

- Whether the function is being fulfilled
- Whether standards are being complied with
- Whether the agreed annual objectives are being met
- An evaluation of conduct-related objectives
- Leadership These can in turn be subdivided into individual criteria: managing staff / management skills / ability to make decisions.

The more precisely individual elements are defined, the more precisely they can be observed and evaluated. Transparency is key for everyone involved. The line manager knows what needs to be checked, and the person being evaluated has clarity about what is expected of them.

Philosophy of the personal development review

- In agreeing objectives or discussing performance, matters pertaining to development and support are top of the list. Having a conversation, and not completing a form, is important here: you need to be having a dialogue, not giving a monologue.
- Both parties should prepare carefully for the talk (basic messages, key questions, main expectations).
- The performance review shouldn't be the only conversation with the staff member during the year! It's important to hold regular discussions.
- The content of the review should not come as a surprise.
- Rather, the focus is on discussing the staff member's strengths and weaknesses from their own perspective in relation to performance and/or agreed objectives.
- It's a chance for them to share their views with the line manager.
- In an ideal scenario, objectives are agreed upon; in the worst case, they are imposed.
- It's important to treat the other person in the way you would like to be treated.

Helpful literature:

Beobachter Ratgeber: Die Richtigen finden und fördern ("Finding and supporting the right people"). Beobachter-Buchverlag, 2003.

Haberleitner Elisabeth et al.: Führen, Fördern, Coachen ("Leading, supporting, coaching"). Piper Verlag, 2004.