



A CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE

Facilitated performance reviews can provide meaningful feedback

By Jan Perkins, ICMA-CM, and Frank Benest, ICMA-CM

Facilitated performance evaluations emerged as an important tool in helping local government managers succeed, according to the 2015 study, *Challenges and Strategies: Maximizing Success for City and County Managers in California*. Conducted by Cal-ICMA—the official state affiliate for ICMA members in California—the study involved an online survey and several focus groups of local government managers to gather information.

Managers said that one of their key stressors was their relationship with elected officials. They also pointed out that an annual facilitated performance evaluation process can be a way to engage the governing body and manager in a constructive dialogue that can strengthen the relationship.

Focus group members mentioned the value of facilitated performance reviews, particularly in politically turbulent environments. These managers said that such a performance evaluation process was helpful in getting useful feedback from elected officials. The process also offers a venue for the manager to say difficult things to elected officials about what is needed for the manager to be successful.

In the focus groups, the managers who suggested a facilitated evaluation process said that it surfaced important issues and improved the relationship with the governing body. It allowed an important dialogue between members of the governing body so they could know—face-to-face—what each other was thinking about on some critical issues. That is an opportunity often

unavailable in the open, public arena.

This is what Erik Kvarsten, city manager of Gresham, Oregon, thinks about the facilitated process: “I have always appreciated facilitated performance evaluations because they are thorough, and stimulate an environment where councilors can most freely engage the process and express themselves.

“In my experience, this has resulted in far more constructive and useful performance feedback than other approaches. In addition, I have been fortunate enough in a number of cases to have former city managers facilitating the process, who fully know and understand the job and its challenges.

“This has opened the door for extremely useful exchanges with the elected officials I serve and opportunities

to receive timely and candid advice from the facilitator, in addition to the formal performance review.”

An Overview

When it comes to performance evaluations, the most typical options are:

- The mayor, governing body president, or chair of the personnel committee collects performance comments from governing body members and leads the performance discussion.
- The manager facilitates and manages the process, including sending out the evaluation format and facilitating the conversation. While this is not a best practice, managers sometimes find themselves needing to do this because the governing body will not.
- The city attorney or county counsel manages the performance review.
- A review does not happen because the elected officials either do not want to do it, see no need for an evaluation, or claim they do not have the time for a review process.

Yet another option is for a third-party facilitator to conduct the evaluation process. The manager or governing body hires an experienced adviser to conduct the review in a timely manner and reach consensus on the evaluation.

A good facilitator will be able to conduct interviews with officials, facilitate governing body discussions, and keep the conversation balanced and moving toward consensus. A background in local government, particularly as a manager, is a bonus.

A facilitated performance evaluation may be especially useful if:

- Past feedback has not been helpful or specific.
- There are strong differences on the governing body and the elected officials cannot constructively have a conversation about such an important matter without help.
- It's difficult for the governing body to forge a consensus about the manager's performance.

- The governing body resists doing an evaluation.
- Past evaluations were not completed in a timely manner.

Understanding the Process

A 1999 *PM* article by George Carav-alho, then city manager, and Jo Anne Darcy, then mayor of Santa Clarita, California, outlined the process they used and the benefits of a facilitated performance evaluation, many of which still hold true today.

In their case, the facilitator met with the manager and councilmembers individually, eliciting ideas and feedback on issues facing the local government, relationships, and the manager's strengths and areas for improvement.

The facilitator then met with the city council in an executive session for discussion as a group, after which the manager joined the meeting to hear feedback presented from the group perspective and offered thoughts on it.

The facilitator guided the group toward a list of action statements, an overall summary evaluation and a report from the facilitator, along with any proposed compensation increase. A follow-up report was scheduled for

The manager needs to be extremely clear about what he or she is hoping to gain from that input and to whom it will be presented. Input can be gained through a confidential survey conducted by a third party or through individual interviews.

With either approach, the responses are consolidated into a report and reviewed with the manager. The facilitator and manager can decide early in the process whether the responses will also be reviewed with the governing body as part of the closed-session discussion.

Every situation, of course, is different, and the process must be tailored to the unique circumstances of the local government. If evaluations are public record, participants may wish to present findings verbally rather than in a written report.

Some states require disclosure of personnel evaluations, including those of the manager. In closed sessions, it may be necessary beforehand to set ground rules regarding confidentiality and the use of social media.

Even though, for instance, the rules for executive sessions are that the discussions will be confidential, some elected officials have been known to tweet during the session, as remarkable as that

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six months later to update the council on the goals and action items agreed to during the review.

In many cases, the manager is included in the entire executive session in order to fully understand the differing and similar points of view and to be part of the entire discussion.

Some managers are interested in more input than only from the governing body, so they pursue what is sometimes referred to as a 360 review, in which direct reports or even other people can be asked for their input about the manager.

may seem. A skilled facilitator will work with participants to devise a process that works for everyone.

The Ratings Issue

The questions used in the evaluation are critically important. The questions should relate to the chief executive's job and not be the same questions used for the organization's other managers, including department heads or mid-level managers.

The job of executive is quite different from the job of an organization's other managers because it involves

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relationships with the governing body; particular types of interactions with the community; overall management and organizational leadership; budget and finance; and specific goals for the individual.

Some governing bodies like the idea of ranking the manager's performance with numerical scores, while others find that numbers become the focus and detract from specific feedback and suggestions. The manager has to first determine what the value of ratings would be in deciding whether or not to attach them to questions.

Governing body members can be "hard" or "soft" graders. Ratings can end up being the focus of the conversation. The true focus should be on the specific feedback.

The greatest value to the manager and to the governing body is the conversation during the executive session. Keeping the focus on the governing body members' responses to the questions and forging consensus from the conversation is a way for everyone to come out of the session with a clear understanding of expectations for the manager. Numerical ratings can distract from this focus.

If there is a reason that an overall rating is necessary, asking for an overall rating, after all of the questions are asked, would be a way to gauge a governing body's view of the manager, particularly in consideration of compensation.

Tangible Benefits

A facilitated process can provide benefits for both the manager and the governing body. The facilitated process can offer opportunities to head off problems before they grow; recognize and celebrate successes; provide dedicated time to reflect on the working relationship and consider feedback that may not arise in day-to-day dealings; design an action plan with specific ideas; and communicate openly and honestly without becoming personal or defensive.

Specific benefits for the manager include:

- A timely and well-managed process.

- Specific, useful feedback.
- Consensus view of the manager's performance and clarity about the majority's desires regarding future performance and priorities.
- An opportunity to discuss compensation or contract changes in a constructive manner.

For the governing body, a facilitated process can be valuable because:

- The process consumes less time and effort.
- All governing body members have their say; one or two members do not dominate the conversation.
- The dialogue is less politicized and more focused on objective criteria.
- The governing body achieves a consensus about a few priorities moving forward and the desired role of the manager in achieving those priorities.

Dan Keen, city manager, Vallejo, California, says this about the benefits he perceives from facilitated performance evaluations: "Earlier in my career, I didn't use a facilitator, instead relying on mayors and councilmembers to provide me with their feedback using checklist forms.

"Some of those evaluations were simply awful experiences. Councilmembers wouldn't give honest feedback in front of one another, petty issues received more discussion than core performance objectives, and discussions sometimes became difficult and emotional between the councilmembers.

"Since using a facilitator, I've found that I get much more valuable feedback, from every councilmember, and the discussions are appropriately focused on my performance and my team's performance, rather than the minor issues.

"Plus, these sessions often turn into mini team-building sessions with the council and manager, with typically positive outcomes."

Obstacles Exist

While a statistical survey has not been

conducted, our conversations with colleagues around the country indicate that only a small minority use facilitated performance evaluations. There may be any number of reasons that facilitated processes are not used:

- The internal process has worked well in the past and there is no perceived need for outside help.
- The manager or governing body has no experience with facilitated evaluations and doesn't know how the process can help.
- If performance evaluation reports or discussions from closed sessions could be made public, the manager may be reluctant to have a structured process.
- The cost may be viewed as an obstacle.

Cost will differ by region as well as complexity of the process. A general guide would be the cost of a facilitator for a one-day workshop in your area. To better determine the cost in your region, reach out to colleagues who have used facilitated evaluations.

The cost will also depend on how complex the process is. If it involves only the governing body and manager, then it will be lower than if the manager desires a 360-degree evaluation, with input from direct reports or others.

Setting the Stage

For managers interested in the idea of facilitated performance evaluations, there are a few ways to raise the topic with a governing body. Some managers include the practice as a provision in their employment agreement.

Others identify governing bodies in their region that have used facilitated evaluations and then present a report on the process to their elected officials.

Another good approach is to raise the idea after a regular performance review. Include an overview with the board or relevant board committee that looks at what went well, what was difficult, and whether a facilitated evaluation would improve the process.

The Bottom Line

Every employee deserves to know what supervisors think of his or her performance, and everyone involved in the evaluation benefits from a process that is well-organized, helpful, specific, and timely.

For the unique circumstances of local government managers, a facilitated evaluation process can eliminate many potential obstacles to a constructive review, ensuring that all involved are working toward the goal of continuous improvement.

There are a variety of means to achieve that end. An outside facilitator can be an addition to the manager's toolbox to use to discern what his or her governing body members truly think.

City Manager Wade McKinney, Indian Wells, California, and president, California City Management Foundation, believes this about the facilitated process: "Evaluations are beneficial to maintain a healthy council-manager relationship, which is key to our success and sanity.

"The facilitated evaluation provides more feedback to both the council and manager in a useful way. Councilmembers can each communicate in their own way, and the facilitator can help them clarify their thoughts and make productive suggestions.

"The facilitator makes the discussion between the two engaging, positive, and useful. I find that I come away with an actual understanding of where I can improve and what the council expects.

"A clear benefit is the advice and counsel that the facilitator provides to both elected officials and managers on building relationships and keys to success." **PM**



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