

A Better Way: The Facilitated CAO Performance Review

A mutually beneficial evaluation process that provides city/county managers with meaningful feedback from their elected officials

By Dan Keen, ICMA-CM (Retired); and Jan Perkins, ICMA-CM (Retired) | Aug 01, 2022 | PM MAGAZINE - ARTICLE



Meaningful feedback is a gift. It is critical to effective leadership and in ensuring that a city manager's actions align with the elected officials to whom they report.

But the performance evaluation process is not an easy one in any setting. For city managers, city attorneys, and other top appointees in local government, it can sometimes be quite difficult to get practical and helpful feedback from their elected officials. Governing body members often find the process time-consuming, cumbersome, and not particularly effective.

There is a way for the annual performance evaluation process to be easier, more useful, and helpful for everyone involved, where the appointee receives specific feedback and clear goals: the *facilitated* evaluation. A third party manages the evaluation process, acts as a neutral party to gather data from elected officials (and sometimes from the manager's or appointee's colleagues), analyzes the data, and presents the findings to the manager in a way that encourages growth.

The facilitated evaluation presents opportunities for both the elected officials and the executive to engage in a useful exercise. The elected officials have a way to candidly and thoroughly offer their individual feedback, with the governing body then reaching agreement as a whole on goals and expectations.

For Elected Officials

For city councils and other governing bodies, the facilitated evaluation process offers many benefits:

1. It professionalizes the process.

Most elected officials aren't trained in performing employee evaluations. Even for those who do them at work, the process of evaluating an executive appointed by a governing body is very different, given the multiple elected officials in a public agency instead of just one supervisor in other settings. Councils also turn over regularly, so often there are members who haven't been through an evaluation process yet. The facilitated evaluation brings consistency and professionalism to the process.

2. It values all opinions.

Often in a council-led evaluation, one or two voices come to dominate the discussion. A facilitator can structure the process so that everyone's opinions are given equal weight and can be expressed in a thoughtful, reflective setting, rather than in a group discussion that can meander or become contentious.

3. It makes the process easier.

In a mayor- or council-led evaluation, elected officials not only have to consider and compose feedback, but they must also manage all aspects of the process. With a facilitator, one person is responsible for managing the evaluation from start to finish, and the board or councilmembers can concentrate on formulating useful feedback for the manager.

4. It creates clarity.

For some councils and governing bodies we've worked with, members have never had a chance to consider the appointed official's role in executing their expectations. The facilitated evaluation allows councilmembers to share with each other how they perceive the manager's role and consider views other than their own. Often a much richer and more nuanced picture of the council's vision emerges when they have a chance to consider the manager's role and performance.

For Managers (and Other Appointed Executives)

The facilitated performance evaluation also helps executives:

1. It results in meaningful feedback.

Working for multiple councilmembers means multiple opinions. This kind of evaluation includes the important step of analyzing and synthesizing the feedback so the manager gets a clear picture of how the council as a whole sees the manager's work.

2. It clears the air.

When the facilitator has a background in local government (which is helpful), the facilitator can point out little things gathered in the process that the manager can attend to. For instance, in one evaluation we performed, the manager had not personalized his office at all, and it led a few councilmembers to wonder whether the manager was committed to the job. The facilitator advised the manager to hang some family photos and bring in some professional mementos as soon as possible, and a potential point of ongoing doubt was removed.

3. It separates the message from the messenger.

When a councilmember makes a pointed criticism of a manager during an evaluation, it can sting. But when the same criticism is presented as a data point in a comprehensive evaluation report, it often feels less personal and more actionable.

4. It focuses on opportunities.

When structured correctly, the evaluation is a forward-looking process, focused on aligning the council's expectations with the manager's performance. The best processes are results-oriented, increasing collaboration and contributing to the success of both the manager and the governing board.

It can be helpful when the evaluation includes a 360-degree assessment, with staff offering feedback. Managers can learn some important things by hearing from their direct reports. This can be done either through interviews or a survey instrument.

Additional Considerations

A word of caution: Numbered rating systems are popular for performance evaluations. Whether you use a facilitator or not, a numbered rating system is never helpful. Evaluating someone's performance is a complex process, and reducing it to a scale of 1 to 5 helps neither the evaluated nor the evaluators. Some people are "hard graders" and others just check the top box. Some will use it to avoid providing specific, meaningful feedback. In our experience, rating systems reduce the amount of feedback provided to the manager, and often produce a muddled and confusing result without clear direction to the manager.

Is there a downside to facilitated performance evaluations? Some elected officials may balk at paying for a process that they believe they can do themselves. But given the significant investment that governing bodies make in their managers, the number of staff and budgets that managers are responsible for, and the importance of assessing and correcting course as needed, the cost of facilitation is minimal when

considered alongside the benefits. In fact, it can create huge cost-savings from avoiding breakdowns in the council-manager relationship, which could result in premature departures of the manager, terminations and significant expense for severance payments, and legal costs.

In our experience, overwhelmingly the elected officials and managers walk away pleased by the ease and efficiency of the facilitated process, and eager to use the results to achieve greater things. Many councilmembers have also expressed the desire that all future evaluations be conducted with a facilitator’s help, recognizing that it is a key to a successful council-manager relationship.

Conclusion

The goal of the performance evaluation is to provide the manager or other top appointee with meaningful feedback. It is a minor but important investment of resources to ensure that the council and manager are in alignment, and that they are working in sync on behalf of the important policy and program objectives of the community. A facilitated process is an efficient way to assist the council and manager in conveying the gift of meaningful feedback that is not only needed but deserved by a council appointee.



DAN KEEN ICMA-CM (Retired), is a special advisor at Management Partners. He has more than 35 years of experience in local government, serving as city manager for the California cities of Vallejo, Concord, Novato, Seaside, and La Palma.



JAN PERKINS ICMA-CM (Retired), is vice president of Management Partners. She has 30 years of management experience in local government. Before joining Management Partners in 2005, she served in several California and Michigan jurisdictions, including as city manager in Fremont and Morgan Hill, California.

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