

**EVALUATING DYSFUNCTIONAL  
POLICE PERFORMANCE**

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# EVALUATING DYSFUNCTIONAL POLICE PERFORMANCE

A Zero-Based Approach

*By*

**D.J. VAN METER, PH.D.**



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*This book is dedicated to the memory of  
Dr. Thomas Gilbert, father of Human Performance  
Technology, and all scholars and practitioners  
who have been influenced by his work.*



## PREFACE

Performance evaluations can be one of the most important and effective means for giving recognition, improving future performance, and justifying personnel decisions. However, in order for evaluations to be effective and defensible they must satisfy a number of standards established by technical experts and courts alike. Among these standards are:

- The rater should be capable of observing the performance being rated.
- Raters should be trained in the system and in how to rate performance using the system.
- Objective (i.e., measurable without human bias) measures should be used. Vague and subjective standards undergo heightened levels of scrutiny by the courts.
- Avoid using single rater systems with subjective measures and employees rated are different from the rater in sex, race, national origin, or religion. They will be subjected to a higher level of scrutiny by the courts.
- Written policies and procedures should be provided for raters, and management must ensure that such policies and procedures are followed.
- Employees should have a right to challenge an evaluation score they believe to be unfair or inaccurate. When possible, the employee should be given a chance to improve the performance before receiving an unfavorable score.

The system you are about to learn meets all of these criteria- and more. In fact, if you study the information presented in this book and follow its guidelines, Z-Base will benefit your organization in at least five ways. It will:

- Remove the subjectivity found in nearly all other evaluation systems.
- Enable fair and legally defensible decision-making based on evaluation information.
- Increase management's credibility and trust with employees.
- Improve handling employee complaints.
- Increase employee performance.

However, Z-Base is not a substitute for good management. It cannot:

- Make decisions for you. It can only give you the information needed to make defensible decisions.
- Make you popular with all of your employees. Not all people like to perform, nor do they want to be held accountable for their lack of performance.
- Replace the need to supervise and pay attention to the needs of your employees.

Furthermore, Z-Base will not improve your shooting score, golf score, make you a better guitar player, storyteller, or bank robber. There is a good chance that you probably already knew that.

Z-Base is short for Zero-Base. The name is appropriate because it describes a system that objectively measures and *rates performance*, determines if improvement is needed, and if so, *evaluates improvement*.<sup>1</sup> If so, the costs associated with the improvement effort do not affect the employee's final evaluation score. It will remain at zero, a perfect score. If improvement failed to occur, then (and only then) all costs associated with the improvement effort become the employee's evaluation score. While this may sound like a negative way to approach performance evaluation, I believe that after you have studied the information presented in this book you will agree with me that it actually makes a great deal of sense.

Chapter One presents an overview of the system. After reading this chapter, you will understand why a zero-based approach to performance evaluation is needed. This chapter in conjunction with the information located in Appendix N provides answers to many of the

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1. Throughout the book, an effort has been made to distinguish between rating performance and evaluating improvement. The intention is to convey that these are treated as two separate and distinct processes in this system.

questions that are asked about this procedure. The information presented in this chapter should be used for conducting orientation training for all employees in your organization.

Chapter Two contains a review of the technical and legal issues associated with performance evaluation systems and how Z-Base addresses those issues. Case law is used to support management's rights to establish performance standards and to evaluate performance against those standards. Unfortunately, not enough is said today about management's rights in this area, and my hopes are that the information presented here will serve to help fill that void.

Chapter Three provides information for developing the proper organizational infrastructure (e.g., mission, code of ethics, values statements, job descriptions) that must be in place before implementing Z-Base, or any evaluation system for that matter. An organization's infrastructure establishes the legal validity required by courts should a system come under judicial review. Information in this chapter should be presented to all executive and supervisory personnel.

Chapter Four instructs how to develop objective Priority Performance Measures (PPM's). Measures are at the heart of every evaluation system. They are the system's rating and evaluation items. The information in this chapter, in conjunction with the numerous examples provided in the *Directory of Performance Measures* located in Appendix J, will establish a solid foundation for Z-Base.

Chapter Five explains how functional and dysfunctional performance data is gathered, analyzed, and rated. Detailed information is presented in Appendix A for developing *Performance Profiles*, a computerized data tracking and rating system designed for Z-Base. The information presented in this appendix assumes that the reader has a basic understanding of how computerized spreadsheet programs (e.g., Microsoft Excel) function.

Chapter Six is devoted to explaining how the Problem-Solving Conference (PSC) is conducted when a rating indicates that an employee's performance needs improved. PSC's are central to Z-Base and ensure that employees are given a fair opportunity to correct problem (i.e., dysfunctional) performances, before the employee's evaluation score (i.e., Z-Score) is affected.

Chapter Seven is devoted to Z-Scores and their calculation. A Z-Score is an employee's final evaluation score. This score is a direct count of the administrative costs associated with an employee's failed

improvement efforts and disciplinary action taken against the employee during the evaluation cycle. All employees are encouraged to read the information presented in this chapter. This information in conjunction with that in Chapter One will help to alleviate concerns employees may have about the system and how it will affect them.

Chapter Eight, the final chapter, presents a plan for implementing Z-Base within the typical police services organization. This plan is grounded in organizational change research and experiences I have encountered over the last several years helping agencies improve their evaluation systems.

As you study the information presented in this work it will be helpful to keep this point in mind. This system is based on the premise that *all* employees deserve a good evaluation score and *are guaranteed* that they will receive one at the end of the evaluation cycle—unless they have a performance problem and cannot or will not fix it.

DONALD J. VAN METER

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**EVALUATING DYSFUNCTIONAL  
POLICE PERFORMANCE**



## Chapter One

### THE PURPOSE OF PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS

The primary goal of this chapter is to convince readers that Z-Base makes good sense as a totally new and practical approach to performance evaluation; and, that it will work (very effectively I might add) for any police-services agency. In the next chapter, evidence is presented that employers have all the legal authority necessary to evaluate performance. If you have read the Introduction, you will have already learned many of the most important aspects of Z-Base. Its purpose is to improve performance. By tracking and assessing performance on a regular basis, it identifies improvement potentials early on before they become liabilities (i.e., costs) to the organization.<sup>2</sup> The term “dysfunctional performance” is used in Z-Base to describe performances that fail to meet management’s expectations, or standards.

With Z-Base, only the administrative costs associated with *failed performance improvement efforts* determine an employee’s final evaluation score, known as the Z-Score. If there are no failed improvement efforts, the employee will receive a zero (the best) evaluation score. This will make more sense as you study the materials presented in this book.

Traditionally, performance evaluations have been used to support a wide variety of management actions such as the awarding of merit, making promotions, rendering discipline, or justifying terminations. They have also been used to make employees feel good, feel bad and in some cases—not feel at all. However, *how* performance evaluations are used is often confused with the purpose for conducting them.

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2. In Z-Base, performance assessment means to measure performance. Assessment should always come before performance evaluation.

Experts agree that the central purpose for conducting evaluation systems is to *improve performance*. If so, that raises some interesting questions. First, if performance does not need improvement is it necessary to evaluate it? If an employer were perfectly happy with an employee's performance, why invest the time and effort to improve or evaluate it? Why not simply acknowledge the employee's good performance with a good evaluation rating? Why is it necessary to put the employee through the ritual, and in some instances—humiliation, of being evaluated?

“Oh,” you may respond. “Nobody is perfect.” “Everyone's performance can be improved.” I will agree on the points that nobody is perfect, and perhaps everyone's performance could be improved. However, that only raises the question, why does performance have to be improved or evaluated if it is not causing a problem?

“Well,” might be the response, “How can it be known if someone is happy with an employee's performance unless it is evaluated, first?” Okay, you have stumped me there. I do not know how to tell what makes people happy with anything, let alone someone else's performance. However, I can offer a personal observation. One sure way I have found to tell if an employee's performance is as good as it needs to be is when you measure it and it satisfies standards. Evaluating performance is not the same as assessing (i.e., measuring) performance. Measuring performance involves the process of determining the scope and/or magnitude of performance. Evaluation involves placing a value on the measurements produced from an assessment.

I agree with the experts that the purpose of an evaluation system is, or should be, to improve performance. However, with Z-Base I am suggesting that the target of an evaluation system should be the administrative costs associated with *unimproved performance*. My short argument is that if there are no discernable problems with an employee's performance, or problems occur but improvement efforts pay off, then there is nothing left of value to evaluate. There is no unimproved performance.

Consider that employees are obligated and paid to perform to standards, and by doing so, they are merely fulfilling their employment responsibilities. The fact is that if employees have no performance problems, or problems are corrected during the evaluation period, that is the evaluation! Praise these employee if you wish, shower them with extra rewards if you can, but *give* them the excellent evaluation score they deserve.

“But,” you may ask, “What if some employees have performed above the standards, how are these folks rewarded if those just meeting standards are given excellent evaluation?” The respond to that is the standards were set too low to start. I will explain in later chapters that when performance is properly defined and employees are similarly situated the performance levels between employees should not vary by more than twenty percent of another. This is known as the 80/20 Rule in discrimination law; history has proven it true.

Here is an analogy. There are only two times that I will go near a doctor’s office. One is when my wife has a health problem, and I go along to comfort her. The other time is when my wife thinks I have a health problem—and she drags me. Now, recall the last time you went to a doctor. Did you go because you were pleased with your health or concerned about it? Unless you enjoy visiting doctors, chances are you were concerned, or at least someone was concerned, about your health. You went because you wanted to make sure that you had no serious health problems. Now, how did the doctor determine that you were, in fact, healthy? Most do it by checking for abnormalities. In other words, they look for problems! They are taught to evaluate health by assessing the extent of diseases and injuries. Clinicians are problem-focused. Performance evaluators should be as well.

In designing Z-Base, it just made sense to ask, if the purpose of performance evaluations is to improve performance, and there are no discernable problems, what is left to evaluate? The answer was—nothing!

If we accept the reasoning that the best way to improve performance is by removing problems, then it seems logical to focus an evaluation system on the costs of performance improvement. To an evaluator, performance is health and problems are diseases.

I will admit that this reasoning calls for some reverse thinking. However, I am left-handed and we “lefties” have had to learn to think in reverse to survive in this right-handed world. I argue that reverse thinking (something experts call “retrograde analysis”) is exactly what is called for in performance evaluation systems. By focusing on performance (i.e., comparing *what is* with *what should have been*), we are able to exam the process of performance and fix problems before they develop into liabilities.

Before proceeding further, it will be helpful to define the term “performance.” This is a word that has caused a great deal of confusion in the evaluation literature. In fact, traditional performance evaluation

systems do not evaluate performance at all. What they attempt to evaluate are the characteristics, traits, and behaviors of the performer. While these factors are important to the production of performance, they are not performances.

### **WHAT IS PERFORMANCE?**

Traditionally, performance evaluation systems have not evaluated performance. They remind me of the comedian who tells the story about going to a doctor for a physical examination. The doctor had poor bedside manners and told his patient that he was in terrible physical condition. The comic's blood pressure measured 280/210, the scales showed him to be fifty pounds overweight and his cholesterol level was 130 points above average. Angrily, he called the doctor a quack and declared that he was going to seek a second opinion. "I don't charge for second opinions," the doctor replied calmly, "you're ugly as well."

Unfortunately, and similar to the doctor's error, evaluators often confuse performance (i.e., measurable results and accomplishments) with subjective opinions about the characteristics and behaviors of the performer. Performance is not about an employee's loyalty, attitude, physical appearance, or any of the other hundred or so personal traits and characteristics of most people. Performance is not about the processes or work behaviors people use to achieve a result. Rather, performance is the result. Performance can be objectively measured (i.e., mathematically derived) against definable standards. Performance is what people accomplish, or produce, when they do their jobs properly.

The Boy Scouts' standards of being trustworthy, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, friendly, thrifty, obedient, cheerful, brave, clean, and reverent are marvelous human virtues. Nevertheless, they are only virtues, not performances. They are human values that guide and direct the behaviors of the performer that may or may not lead to performance. A person may have all those virtues and still not have the necessary knowledge, opportunities, or abilities to accomplish a performance.

When the target of an evaluation system is performance then values and behaviors are invalid and inappropriate as rating items, or stan-