


## DIRECTOR EVALUATION – A COMMUNICATION TOOL

by Dan Cain



t's every library board's nightmare.

Too much money spent on a controversial collection. Operational changes have been made and the board hasn't been kept informed. Constituents are complaining. Trust between board and director is at an all-time low.

So now what? Take a deep breath, keep your mouth shut and put up with a bad situation? Attack the situation with guns blazing? Fire the director and hope for better luck with the next one?

Of course, there are cases where a sticky situation is simply the result of hiring the wrong person for the job. But the much more likely scenario is simply poor communication between board and director. The board has failed to communicate its expectations to the director and the director has failed to tell how he or she is doing the job.

The solution is not complex. Just get to work and rebuild some of the communications systems. One of the best means of opening communication lines and rebuilding the board team is a formal board evaluation of the director.

Unfortunately, board members often view evaluation of director performance as a negative process, and it just simply is not if done right. Performance evaluation can and should be a positive, constructive activity if approached with the right attitude and a carefully designed process.

Director evaluation is a normal part of the board's job description. The board hires a director, gives him/her a plan of action for the library and delegates day-to-day management. Then the board must monitor/evaluate how well the delegation is being carried out.

But evaluation is more than just monitoring employee performance; it's an opportunity to build the board/director team. The result of a good director evaluation should be:

- board and director get on the same track.
- the director understands board expectations.
- board members learn how to help the director.
- the team gets definitive performance improvement goals.

Here are a few good rules that will help you get those results...

\* Evaluate formally, annually, in writing. The performance evaluation is the documentation that every employer needs to protect the business. Informal evaluation doesn't provide documentation that may be needed down the road and is not complete enough to cover all the bases.

\* The board speaks with one voice. When the final evaluation results are presented to the director, the results are the consensus of the board on all items. A board cannot give seven different evaluations to the director and expect it to be clear to anyone, including the director.

\* Staff are not part of the director evaluation. The director is the board's employee. Staff are employees of the director. Staff cannot evaluate their "boss" objectively. They don't know what the board expects of the director, and thus cannot evaluate that performance.

\* It is important that the full board team discuss the evaluation results with the director. This is an opportunity to really communicate and smooth out the rough edges of the board/director team.

\* Evaluation is no good without follow-through. Good performance should be rewarded and poor performance corrected.

### CRITERIA FOR AN EFFECTIVE EVALUATION

The majority of library board members realize that director evaluation is an assessment of director performance only. Evaluation can't be based on what the director wears or what he or she does after library hours, unless, of course, these have some bearing on the way the director carries out the job.

Board members often ask "Exactly what areas of performance do we evaluate?" There are five important categories of performance that should be included in the evaluation:

1. Organizational leadership—How well does the director work toward the mission of the library? Does he/she understand the needs of those you serve and work to serve those needs?
2. Business and financial management—Does the director understand the library's financial needs and accounting systems? Does he/she make appropriate financial decisions and recommendations and help the board understand the library's financial situation?

3. Relationship with the board—Does the director offer the board direction, information and support? Does he/she understand the employer/employee relationship with the board?

4. Personal characteristics that impact job performance—Does the director maintain high standards of ethics, honesty and integrity? Does he/she devote time and energy to the job and exercise good judgment in carrying out responsibilities?

5. Innovation/improvement—Does the director propose and promote change that is for the good of the library and its constituents?

## LAY THE GROUNDWORK

A good evaluation of the director shouldn't happen on a moment's notice. The groundwork for evaluation must be laid out long before the evaluation actually takes place.

The director needs two important documents before he or she can truly understand what his or her job entails. The director's job description and the library's long-range plan outline exactly what the board expects and what goals need to be pursued. Without these two documents, the library director is left to set his or her own direction and priorities, which can be different from those of the board.

Once these documents are in place, the board can set a timetable for the formal evaluation process. Ideally, the evaluation cycle should begin a year before board members sit down to actually complete the instrument.

## THE EVALUATION CYCLE

### The Form

The evaluation cycle begins with the development of the instrument. The right evaluation instrument will promote communication and enhance the relationship between the board and director. An inadequate form can leave you with useless information.

A board committee is valuable in researching and developing the evaluation form. The committee should review instruments used by other libraries and organizations in developing its evaluation form. The proposed instrument should then be presented to the full board for approval.

### Completing the Form

All members of the board should complete the evaluation form individually, not as part of a board meeting. Board members need time to seriously consider each evaluation item and should not be influenced by others as they complete the instrument. Since the instruments are com-

pleted anonymously, this is an opportunity for board team members to be very open and candid in their responses.

The director should also be asked to complete the evaluation instrument. Although his or her completed instrument will not be a part of the compiled results, this gives the director the opportunity to tune into what the board is doing. This preparation will be valuable later when the board and director sit down together to discuss the results.

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Filling out the evaluation instrument is probably the easiest part of the evaluation process. The hard work comes as the board determines what single message it will deliver to the director. The board cannot hand the director multiple evaluations. It must speak to the director with one voice.

### Compiling the Results

Once the evaluation instruments have been completed and the results compiled, the board should meet alone in an executive session to discuss the results. Board members need to be very candid in this discussion. The director will be invited to talk with the board later, but this time is for the board only.

Board members should come to consensus on the results to be delivered to the director. Do not simply take the greatest number of responses to each item on the instrument as the board's response. That ignores the needs of the minority to speak to the issue. Discuss any item that has a clear divergence of opinions and attempt to bring the board to consensus.

Remember that consensus is an agreement from all board members that we can "live with" the decision. To reach consensus will require compromise and much more concern for the needs of the team than for personal needs.

Keep in mind that the purpose of the evaluation is ultimately for improvement of the organization. If a criticism or commendation will result in better performance of the director for the organization, give it. If not, leave it alone.

Do not let one evaluator influence the evaluation results too dramatically. If one evaluator has been consistently high or low in the evaluation in glaring contrast to responses of other board members, that issue needs to be discussed openly, and, if possible, resolved.

### Communicating with the Director

When the board has agreed to the results that will be delivered, invite the director to discuss the results with you. This can be done immediately following the board's closed session. This session should still be closed to all but board members and the director, since candor will be the rule at this meeting.

To begin this session, the board chairperson or a designated board member gives a copy of the board's evaluation results to the director. This is not just a tally of the individual responses, but the board's consensus on each item in the evaluation. Walk through the results and offer any explanation of the ratings.

Invite the director to ask questions or comment on the evaluation results. If the board's intention is not clear, the director cannot benefit from the evaluation. This is an opportunity for board and director to get the issues on the table and have a good open discussion.

The director should respond to the board at a later date on the evaluation results to clarify issues, deliver a plan for improving performance or seek the board's help in making changes.

The evaluation cycle is now complete. Begin the next cycle immediately by asking a committee to do a debriefing of the process just completed and the instrument itself. Make any necessary changes now so they will be in place for the next evaluation session.

A thorough, formal evaluation process doesn't guarantee problems won't arise in the director/board relationship. However, keeping communication lines open through a good evaluation process can help keep small problems from becoming large ones and will help all members of the library board team do their jobs better.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dan Cain is president of The Cain Consulting Group, Inc., located in Hawarden, Iowa. Dan's specialty is boards, board/executive relations, board restructuring and long-range planning. He travels nationwide to lead training sessions and present workshops for boards of a variety of non-profit organizations, including libraries and library organizations. He also offers a number of publications, including *The Executive Evaluation Kit*, to help boards learn their roles and carry out their responsibilities. For more information, call 1-800-735-9471.