

# The problem with annual performance evaluations

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They should be used to inform and encourage, not to penalize.

With reference to Gerald Walton's [opinion](#) piece, in which he declares that "academic underperformers must be called out," I would like to suggest an alternative, more helpful approach to the problem he identifies. As dean of the faculty of arts at the University of Manitoba, from 1999 to 2004, it was my task to implement Article 35 of our collective agreement, which called for meaningful annual performance evaluations. The trick was to do that in a positive way rather than a destructive one.

In any large organization, there will be some people who are not doing all that they could, though my experience in the largest of our faculties, with around 500 employees, was that the number of underperformers was not large. Admittedly, with the tripartite structure of professors' workloads – teaching, research and administration – almost everyone finds some of the tasks they are expected to do uncongenial. But, I found that the vast majority of my colleagues were doing a creditable job in all three areas of endeavor. And there are, of course, good reasons, both public and institutional, why this trichotomy of duties should be performed by every faculty member even if we find that we are better at one than another.

In designing our annual evaluations, I was mindful of the perception among both administrators and academic colleagues that there were a few people who were not pulling their weight and who needed to be confronted about that. But, it was also clear to me that almost all of these people were not content or satisfied with their colleagues' perception of them or with their own sense of their performance. I also knew that there were indeed some inequalities of workload that had to be addressed. The draft proposals, which were discussed at faculty council, thus focused on the need to balance the fear of an unsatisfactory evaluation with the desire for improvement. This meant that I affirmed the clause in Article 35 of the collective agreement that insisted that annual evaluations should be primarily formative, not disciplinary, in intent.

The process began with an annual activity report listing the just completed year's teaching responsibilities, publications and service commitments, as well as any forms of recognition. If in each category the work was satisfactory, a short written acknowledgement would follow. Heads were, of course, encouraged to acknowledge with compliments throughout the year any work that was evidently excellent. But where the activity report (or other evidence such as student evaluations) led to concerns about a person's performance, heads of departments were required to meet with that colleague and discuss ways in which there could be improvement.

I hoped that there were questions that would naturally arise. Would, for example, someone struggling to get research done and into print benefit from a grade-marker, or a small grant to subsidize the cost of giving a paper at a conference? Or would someone getting poor student evaluations benefit from sympathetic discussions, workshops about teaching techniques, or even friendly classroom visitations? Would someone not doing enough service benefit from a candid talk, or respond to an appeal to stand for election to a particular committee? In any case, the results of the head's discussion with his or her colleague would then be put in writing and a copy sent to the dean.

In short, weak performance was in most cases not just a matter of laziness or selfishness, but rather often a reflection of unhappiness not always, or even sometimes, admitted. There might be a history of scholarly rejections, or student complaints, which had undercut a person's confidence or enthusiasm. Sometimes, too, intractable personal circumstances of family life were at the heart of ineffectiveness. These are, of course, matters that must be kept confidential and so are not, and should not be, visible to others. In proposing my implementation of annual performance evaluations, I tried to remember that no one wants to be seen as a failure, and everyone enjoys success. I felt that, if one were not succeeding, it would not help to be "called out" and punished. In my view, the best evaluations are those that identify problems where they exist, but also the ways and means of encouragement that

can lead to improvement.

On the other hand, independent of the annual evaluations, it was my responsibility as dean to address persistent poor performance or wilful neglect of duty with appropriate sanctions. Within the framework of the collective agreement, in such cases the denial of salary increments or other disciplinary measures, such as letters of reprimand, are a legitimate response.

The language of Dr. Walton's article expresses his frustration, impatience and anger about the fact that tenured senior faculty members are not being "held to higher account" for their unsatisfactory "output." Such words seem to point to a lack of success in research. But I have also noticed that sometimes successful researchers are eager to avoid their responsibilities for undergraduate, especially introductory level, teaching, and that some of them protest, when asked, that they are too busy to share the load of serving on committees.

Dr. Walton would like someone to "light a fire" under his underperforming colleagues. In his judgment, there is a clear divide between those who pull their weight and those who do not, with a resulting inequality of workload. In my experience of 44 years, 10 of them in administrative positions, it has seldom been that simple.

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