2004

A PASport to Service Quality: Developing a Performance Assessment System. Part 1: The Context for Performance Assessment

Lynn A. Brock
Cedarville University, brockl@cedarville.edu

Recommended Citation

A PASport TO SERVICE QUALITY:
Developing a Performance Assessment System

PART 1: THE CONTEXT FOR PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT

Lynn A. Brock
Director of
Library Services
Cedarville University
Cedarville, Ohio

THE SERVICE QUALITY ENVIRONMENT

Since the late 1990's, the library literature has been full of studies and analyses of service quality, customer satisfaction, and outcomes assessment as relevant and critical domains for the academic library. Several years ago the Centennial Library professional staff began exploring service quality issues with an interest in developing service quality plans for each library department. While progress has been made on that front, a more intensive effort has been invested in staff performance assessment as an integral element in maintaining high levels of service quality. While Library service quality is certainly affected by the nature of the facilities, the substance of the resources, the scope of information access, and the ability of patrons to effectively use the breadth of resources and services, a primary focus of service quality is on the preparation, skill, and training of the Library faculty and staff. While the link between service quality and staff performance would seem to be obvious, why is it that many academic libraries, and for that fact many academic institutions, have no performance assessment system for staff? In an article in *College and Research Libraries* in 1999, Millson-Martula and Menon indicated that staff interpersonal relations may the most critical element in promoting customer satisfaction. They go on to say that no effort to enhance customer satisfaction [in my mind a synonym in the literature for service quality] will succeed unless students and faculty are convinced that library staff, as service providers, care about the quality of service they provide and the manner in which they do it. However, library staff will not demonstrate a high degree of commitment and caring unless they believe that library management cares about the staff as well. Simply put, customer satisfaction equals employee satisfaction. [Millson-Martula and Menon, p.46]. And in my mind, it is difficult to separate employee satisfaction from appropriate performance assessment.

Hernon, Nitecki, and Altman in their search of the library literature for a 1999 article in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship* found that the literature tended to concentrate on one dimension of service quality expectations of the customer and reducing the gap between those expectations and the actual service provided. They suggest that there are three variables in measuring customer satisfaction in libraries. Two of the variables are the information content (the resources) and the service environment (the organization). The third is the service delivered by the staff with a focus on reliability, assurance, tangibles *[conformance to specifications what you say you will do]*, empathy, and responsiveness.

As well, the rise of the use of LibQUAL, an offshoot of the SERVQual movement— as a library service evaluation tool is directly attributable to this growing emphasis on customer expectations in the Library setting. LibQUAL is a research and development project undertaken by the Association of Research Libraries three years ago with a FIPSE *[United States Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education]* grant to define and measure library service quality across institutions and to create a quality-assessment

tool for local planning. The web-based, total market survey instrument was first used with twelve Research libraries, expanded to 43 libraries in 2001, and in 2002 included almost 200 participants nationwide. The survey gathers information on the gaps between users' desired, perceived, and minimum expectations of local library services.

The goals of the project are to (1) establish a library service quality assessment program, (2) develop web-based tools for assessing library service quality, (3) develop mechanisms and protocols for evaluating libraries, and (4) identify best practices in providing library service. The Centennial Library participated in this on-line web-based national survey in 2002. It is interesting that 9 of the 25 questions in the survey focus on staff performance, comprising fully 36% of the items. This percentage is more than that given to the other individual elements—resources, facilities, and accessibility. Staff performance counts when quality service is being delivered.

THE CHALLENGE OF PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT

Implementing and maintaining a system of employee assessment has always been a mine field for both managers and staff. None of us generally enjoy having our work or performance evaluated by someone else, unless of course we are perfect or crave attention. Some have even called for the abolishment of performance evaluation. Coens and Jenkins wrote a book entitled *Abolishing Performance Appraisals*. They assert that these annual reviews do little to improve employee job performance and do nothing to boost an organization's success. They certainly do not advocate, as the book title might suggest, that employees should never be evaluated, but that it should happen more effectively and constructively, primarily more immediately and more frequently. Dale Dauten, a syndicated columnist who calls himself the

"Corporate Curmudgeon," not too long ago wrote a column on the sinister nature of performance appraisals, and concluded by saying, The upshot is that annual appraisals need to be fixed in the sense that the cat gets fixed, so we don't get any more of them. [Dauten, p.8F]

In deriding standard performance evaluations, some have suggested that they are too focused on the individual rather than on the success of the organization. Some say that they are backward-looking, focusing only on the accomplishments of the past; things are changing too fast to focus on the past. Some suggest that typical performance evaluations focus too much on processes and structure, and not on the needs of the users. Some say that they postpone meaningful communication by relegating serious discussions to one time a year. And still others say that typical performance evaluations promote the organization caste system, unnecessarily emphasizing the "them and us" dichotomy.

There has been a proliferation of terminology used to describe these processes, shifting from job evaluations to performance appraisals to performance management to performance planning. While some of the objections to performance evaluation might be true, the assessment of the success of staff in delivering quality service is critical, whatever it is called. How to avoid individual assessment by someone at sometime would seem difficult, if there is a serious desire for quality

service and staff development. Steve Marquandt, in a 1996 article about performance evaluation, supports the move to performance planning and concludes that Backward looking appraisals should be replaced by performance planning for the years ahead. This planning should include a training or developmental assessment, in which participant review the skills necessary to perform the ever-changing library tasks, and are asked in a non-threatening and supportive manner to identify those areas where training and development are needed. [Marquandt, p.107]. Some of this thinking has been incorporated into the Centennial Library performance assessment system.

THE CONTEXT OF THE CENTENNIAL LIBRARY PASport SYSTEM

So, the context in which the Centennial Library PASport (Perfor-

While Library service quality is certainly affected by the nature of the facilities, the substance of the resources, the scope of information access, and the ability of patrons to effectively use the breadth of resources and services, a primary focus of service quality is on the preparation, skill, and training of the Library faculty and staff.

mance Assessment System) system was created is the larger service quality environment. Performance assessment can not stand alone without other components to provide a well-rounded approach to staff improvement and development. At the Centennial Library, performance assessment is only one part of a broader staff development effort which has four elements:

Connection
Maintaining relevant connections among staff requires a level of under-

standing as well as access to job critical information. In order to promote interpersonal understanding, the *Personal Profile System (DISC)* has been used periodically to help staff recognize and respond to how individuals work and make decisions. The *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* personality inventory can also be used, although we have found the *Personal Profile System* to be more relevant to the work setting. Staff must also be well informed and have access to information that allows them to more effectively carry out their responsibilities. The Centennial Library has established StaffLINK, which is a *local* on-line staff resource which serves as the connection for all Library faculty and staff to the information and resources important to an effective work environment and the delivery of quality service. Items on StaffLINK include the organization chart, all job descriptions, calendar and work schedules, a variety of annual, planning, and assessment reports, the Library's electronic newsletter, general forms required for work-related tasks, staff and student staff manuals, all the *PASport* system materials and forms, and relevant Library policy documents. As well, the annual Fall staff retreats and the regular all-staff meetings are important elements in maintaining connections within the staff.

Evaluation

Evaluation includes both service evaluation and personnel performance assessment. Annual on-line surveys of users are important sources for service and staff evaluation. For a number of years the Centennial Library has distributed on-line user surveys to both freshmen and seniors. This allows for longitudinal studies over time to note how student perceptions of service change from the time they are freshmen to the time they are seniors. Returns on these surveys commonly average 40 to 60% of each of the classes and provide an invaluable analysis of service perceptions as well as a constructive

source of a wide range of comments. In place of these surveys, from time to time, the national LibQUAL survey is used, which is also done on-line and provides comparative data to other institutions participating in the survey. On an irregular basis, the last time being 2000, the Library completes a locally developed faculty survey, similar in format to the LibQUAL survey, which focuses on the expectations and satisfaction levels of the University faculty.

Obviously part of effective evaluation is the performance assessment of Library faculty and staff, and the PASport system, to be described in part 2 of this article, is the major tool to accomplish this task. All student library assistants are also evaluated annually by their immediate supervisors, but this system is not currently a formal part of PASport.

Cultivation

Evaluation without cultivation and development can appear to be punitive. As a direct result of job assessments and the preparation of annual Personal Work Development Plans, the Centennial Library has funded a staff development program sensitive to the personal and professional needs of Library faculty and staff. The importance of this element of the program cannot be understated. "Nothing brings consumers back to a library like having properly trained staff that provide excellent customer service, with full knowledge of resources and the ability to promote programs and collections in a holistic way. It is your responsibility to make sure staff get this input and support. How frustrated have you felt when you've dealt with service people unaware or unable to assist you in a purchase because the representatives didn't know what their company could provide? Avoid this perception in your library by continuously offering the necessary training and support to front-line information and circulation staff so they can do their jobs. By assuring training is provided to the front line,

you will strengthen your staff's feelings of professionalism and promote an environment of quality customer services." [Orenstein, p. 85]. For us, this cultivation includes the following initiatives:

Faculty development fund. Library faculty have first choice on the use of the conference funds provided to them by the University as a benefit. Faculty may choose to release some of their allocations for the benefit of another faculty member or for the staff development program. If faculty members require conference funds and travel monies beyond their benefit allocation, funds will be available as long as they are not allocated for other parts of the development program. Every attempt is made to underwrite the total costs of the attendance at approved professional events. From time to time, additional funds may be requested from the Academic Vice President for those Library faculty members presenting papers or major workshops at conferences.

Staff development fund. The development program for Library staff is intended to insure that appropriate job skills can be maintained and advanced to support service quality, to encourage personal and professional development, and to invest in the future of the Library staff. Subsequent to the completion of the annual performance appraisals and the development of the annual Personal Work Development Plan to be described later, the Department head, in consultation with staff members, determines possible training and development needs to assist staff members in improving performance or making progress on their development plans. A comprehensive plan for the entire staff is then put together allocating funds to the most important priorities. Every attempt is made to give each staff member at least one opportunity annually for additional training or skill development in an off-campus environment. Since the Fall of 2000, eighteen Centennial Library faculty and staff have attended over 100 development workshops and seminars

off-campus, focusing on software skills, cataloging skills, management skills, and technical skills. Most of these sessions involved an entire day. As well, one staff member completed the work to become a Certified Computer Technician, two AV Services staff members became Certified Technology Specialists, and another became a Microsoft Office Specialist. All of this activity is in addition to major conferences attended by Library faculty and staff.

Staff Advancement Fund. Commonly, professional development funds are provided by institutions to their faculty, including Library faculty, as part of a benefits package. That is often not the case for staff members. In order to make these development opportunities also available to Library staff, the Centennial Library established the Library Staff Advancement Fund. This fund includes discretionary monies, available to Library staff upon formal application and approval, to attend major professional conferences and extended professional training opportunities. As the professional skill requirements for some Library staff, especially the managers, continue to advance, it is difficult to meet those needs only in regional, one-day conferences or workshops. Extended professional conference and workshop attendance at a distance may be required to allow some Library staff to develop skills needed to effectively use the resources available at the University or to serve the increasingly complex needs of the technological environment.

Library staff can make application to the Staff Advancement Fund to attend major professional events. Attendance at these events could require air transportation, ground transportation, food and lodging, and multiple days away from work. The applications are completed in consultation with the Department head who recommends official consideration. The Library Administrative Council reviews any recommendations and makes the final award selections. The current plan is to underwrite the total cost of any event approved if costs do not exceed available funds. In some instances, approval might require that part of the funding be provided by the applicant. Because multiple applications against limited funds could be received during any year, funding awards are rotated annually to assure a fair opportunity for all qualified staff.

Recognition

Recognizing quality work and achievement closes the loop in an effective staff development program. Recognition should certainly be given regularly in a variety of ways and in a variety of formal, informal, personal, and public settings. A major recognition event for the Centennial Library is the annual Library Recognitions Dinner. Its purpose is not only to acknowledge the work of all the staff during the academic year, but also to provide a venue in which to present specific recognitions to Library faculty, staff, and student staff. The formal dinner includes invitations to Library faculty and staff, their spouses, Library student assistants, and special guests. In addition to a number of special recognitions, annual awards are given, including Certificates of Recognition for Distinctive Service, Student Library Assistant Service Awards, Graduating Senior Library Assistant Recognitions, and a Top Scholar Award.

In concluding Part 1, it is important to remember that performance assessment must be seen as part of a much larger program of staff development, providing a well-rounded approach to staff advancement that involves not only evaluation, but also connection, cultivation, and recognition. Given this context, Part 2 of this article will provide a more detailed description of the purposes and elements of the Centennial Library *PASport* system, concluding with the benefits and challenges experienced in using the system. ✱

REFERENCES

Coens, Tom and Jenkins, Mary. *Abolishing performance appraisals: why they backfire and what to do instead.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2000.

Dauten, Dale. "Written employee evaluations are like threats." *Dayton Daily News.* (March 25, 2001) p. 8f.

Hernon, Peter; Nitecki, Danuta A.; and Altman, Ellen. "Service quality and customer satisfaction: an assessment and future directions." *Journal of Academic Librarianship.* 25 (January, 1999) pp. 9-17.

Marquandt, Steve. "Managing technological change by changing performance appraisal to performance evaluation." *Journal of Library Administration.* 22 (Number 2/3, 1996) pp. 101-110.

Millson-Martula, Christopher and Menon, Vanaja. "Customer expectations: concepts and reality for academic library services." *College & Research Libraries.* 56 (January, 1995) pp.33-46.

Personal Profile System. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Inscape Publishing, copyright 1994.

Orenstein, David, I. "Being in the library business: an entrepreneurship primer for library administrators." *Library Administration & Management.* 16 (Spring, 2002) pp.83-91.