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ABSTRACT

This case study explains the process that a newly created academic department used to develop a coherent system of faculty performance evaluation by combining three previous evaluation systems. The original procedures and criteria for faculty performance evaluation were of administrative and legal concern to the newly created department because the merit evaluation systems used did not align with the annual review process or with criteria for tenure and promotion. In addition, the unequal distribution of newly hired and tenured faculty added to the complexity of creating an acceptable faculty performance evaluation. The Personnel Evaluation System Meta-Evaluation Checklist of D. Stufflebeam (2000), which is based on the Joint Committee Personnel Evaluation Standards (1988), was used to examine the merit documents from other departments in the college and the university tenure and promotion template. Several parts of the old evaluation system were rated "Fair" to "Poor." A model, which ensures that the evaluation system is periodically and systematically reviewed for any positive or negative impact, guided the process for re-evaluating the merit system. The department's Personnel Committee systematically replaced the point allocation system of the old form with qualitative categories of merit. (Author/SLD)

A Standards-Driven Approach to Faculty Evaluation: The Conflict of Change

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ABSTRACT

This case study explains the process that a newly created academic department utilized to develop a coherent system of faculty performance evaluation by combining three previous evaluation systems. The original procedures and criteria for faculty performance evaluation were of administrative and legal concern to the newly created department. The prior merit evaluation systems of the independent academic units within the department were based on differing philosophies: none of which aligned with the annual review process, or with criteria for tenure and promotion. A comprehensive philosophy of faculty performance evaluation to guide and direct productivity was desperately needed. The unequal distribution of newly hired and tenured faculty added to the complexity of creating an acceptable faculty performance evaluation document. Stufflebeam's (2000) Personnel Evaluation System Meta-evaluation Checklist based on the Joint Committee Personnel Evaluation Standards (1988) was used to examine the merit documents from other departments within the College, as well as the University tenure and promotion template. Several parts of the old evaluation system were rated "Fair" to "Poor." A model, which ensures that the evaluation system is periodically and systematically reviewed for any positive or negative impact, guided the process used for reevaluating the merit system. The Personnel Committee systematically replaced the point allocation system of the old form with qualitative categories of merit.

A Standards-Driven Approach to Faculty Evaluation: The Conflict of Change

Merit. Tenure. Promotion. Faculty performance evaluation. Restructuring. Reorganization. Nothing creates a greater sense of frustration and anxiety in faculty than performance evaluation. Performance evaluation combined with reorganization and restructuring of academic departments adds to an already unsettled situation. As the heightened tension of merit evaluation looms on the horizon, seasoned faculty as well as early career faculty feel unappreciated, exasperated and are frequently seized with a desire to leave academic life. The distrust of the system is palpable. Add reorganization of academic units and the situation is indeed disquieting for faculty.

Background and Literature Review

The procedures and criteria for faculty performance evaluation are of concern from both administrative and legal perspectives. In order to provide faculty with appropriate guidelines for performance evaluation all criteria and procedures should be clear and unambiguous. "The criteria should be specific enough to provide faculty members with guidance as to what is expected of them and flexible enough to allow administrators and peer-review committees to consider the faculty members' total accomplishments" (Baez & Centra, 1995, p. 152). Ideally "all units in the institution should be governed by a single reappointment, promotion, and tenure policy" (Baez & Centra, 1995 p. 152). Tension is created in the academic workplace when candidates do not receive adequate information and instruction about performance evaluation.

Faculty have concerns about performance evaluation because of the history of inequities in the system. Inequities arise as a result of inadequate training for academic leaders, hidden political agendas, violation of written agreements, lack of attention to basic rights, inconsistent application of procedures, and general perceptions and expectation of unfair treatment (Baez & Centra, 1995). *The Chronicle of Higher Education* highlights the continuous flow of cases that have evolved from unfairly applied criteria and procedures. In a recent Kent State University case the judge ruled for the plaintiff, a female faculty member, who claimed that she had been unfairly compensated by the

University. The judge wrote in the decision that the university's "merit award system was driven largely by an opaque, decision-making process at the administrative level, did not necessarily reflect peers' assessment of applicants' performances, and rewarded men disproportionately to women" (Nicklin, 2000, p. A14).

Tenure and promotion, the ultimate faculty performance evaluation, is generally seen as ill-defined, impenetrable, punitive, and fraught with the unknown. Faculty surveyed in the New Pathways II: Project on the Tenure Process described "expectations for performance on the tenure track . . . as "ambiguous," "shifting," "conflicting," and "ever-escalating" (Trower, Austin, & Sorcinelli, 2001). Over the years the criteria for tenure have risen dramatically. Departments nowadays frequently require several peer reviewed published articles, books, excellence in teaching, and evidence of community as well as institutional service -- not the same criteria for tenure and promotion that were met by many of those who have already received the imprimatur. The third year or fourth year review process has been instituted to hasten the tenure and promotion decision placing newly arrived scholars under immediate scrutiny before they have a chance to settle into academic life (Wilson, 2001).

Current discussion of faculty performance evaluation includes questions about the value of scholarship, epistemology, and the nature of inquiry. Since epistemologies are central to scholarship and key to the performance evaluation rubric, questions about values arise. "Do we want to prepare novice researchers for the world of educational research as it is, or do we want to prepare them for the world as it might become?" (Pallas, 2001, p. 6).

Faculty performance evaluation procedures grounded in a faculty development philosophy are key to building a climate of continuous quality improvement.

> Time and again, experience has shown that an evaluation system implemented without reference or connection to a faculty development program will generate greater amounts of anxiety and resistance among faculty than a system that is part of a larger faculty development and instructional improvement effort. . . .Ideally, a faculty evaluation system

should be an integral part of a larger evaluation and development program (Arreola & Aleamoni, 1990, p. 53).

A thoughtful performance evaluation system, carefully crafted by faculty and based on the appropriate standards, is a necessity for faculty and institutional viability. The system must benefit both the faculty and the institution by "enhancing personal and professional development, instructional development, and organizational development" (Alstete, 2000, p. iii)

Public skepticism of the faculty role, along with the assessment movement, has cast long shadows on the academic profession. What worked in the past is no longer viable in the present. Most faculty members strive to create positive learning environments for students while taking seriously their role in the generation of new knowledge. Some faculty are able to sustain energy and creativity throughout their careers and are consistently "high performers." Other faculty are unable to produce scholarship or high quality teaching, or choose not to do so, and are responsible for the perception that many faculty are "deadwood," biding their time until retirement. A third group of faculty are unsettled, or at least doubtful, about the faculty role and that affects their productivity and mental attitude toward teaching, scholarship and service (Alstete, 2000). Quick fix approaches and flawed performance evaluation processes leave faculty disconcerted and discontented (Seldin, 1999).

The Challenge

The College of Education and Human Development at a Midwestern, state regional university restructured individual academic units into a School structure. The three academic units involved, Educational Foundations and Research, Educational Leadership and Administration, and Higher Education Administration appeared to have little in common. Nonetheless the restructuring effort was mandated by the Dean but framed as faculty choice. The question for the School Personnel Committee was how to reconceptualize performance evaluation, create a unified merit document from the three existing missions and documents, and satisfy the goals of the three units.

The procedures and criteria for faculty performance evaluation were of concern to the three departments from administrative and legal perspectives. In order to provide both seasoned and non-tenured faculty with appropriate guidelines, all criteria and procedures needed to be clear and unambiguous. At the same time standards had to be convincing and flexible in order to serve the different missions of each academic unit. The goal was to create a single document incorporating commonly determined principles of faculty development so that a single merit, promotion, and tenure policy could govern all.

The prior merit evaluation systems of the independent academic units within the School were based on differing philosophies. For one academic unit competition provided the central focus with a point system which pitted one faculty member against another. Another academic unit based its merit system on a portfolio arrangement that essentially defined a paper trail for documents but capped the total number of merit points possible. None of the existing merit systems aligned the annual review process with criteria and procedures for tenure and promotion. A comprehensive philosophy of faculty performance evaluation to guide and direct productivity was not stated. Measures of validity were not considered. Benchmarking for quality was ignored.

The unequal distribution in each department of newly hired faculty and tenured faculty added to the complexity of creating an acceptable faculty performance evaluation document. The ever-shifting and escalating criteria for tenure and promotion as well as merit over the years meant that those currently sitting in judgment on merit, tenure and promotion decisions were not required to perform at the same level for their own review in the past.

Inequities in resources led to differences between the academic 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Differences were evident between faculty who were provided with departmental funds to present at several conferences and those who were not. Faculty who did not have access to graduate assistants did not want to be compared with faculty who did. Faculty who taught in graduate programs could earn points for dissertations and theses and those who taught only undergraduates could not. The lack of fair and equitable resources, as well as fair standards, created dissension.

The central administration of the University favored a decentralized system of governance with minimal over-arching philosophy to guide faculty performance evaluation policy and procedures at the university, college and program levels. Although a decentralized system allows academic departments the flexibility to meet the needs of the unit, the lack of standards leaves room for inequities and questionable application of process and procedures.

The climate of the institution has been directed for several years by a series of interim administrators who, although steering a steady course, have been unable to provide the appearance of stability and permanence. The continuous search processes for academic deans, provosts, and associate provosts as well as department chairs undermine the authority of those who hold the interim positions. In this climate faculty have been concerned about changing policies and procedures when the next permanent administrator decides to commit to different assumptions and philosophical principles. The "waiting to see what comes next" climate exacerbates the tentative nature of the evaluation procedures that are central to faculty productivity and satisfaction within the institution.

In a vacuum, individual political agendas come to the fore. Some experienced faculty hold to the adage "if it ain't broke don't fix it" because "this is the way we have always done it." Faculty who are territorial about their involvement in past iterations of the policies and procedures feel threatened by change because they have formulated their productivity around the existing models of evaluation. To change the evaluation criteria would involve a change of strategy and challenge basic principles about the faculty role that recalcitrant faculty hold. The reluctant faculty protect their investment in the current system whether or not that system is best for the younger faculty and the academic unit as a whole.

All faculty performance evaluation systems should be grounded in a philosophy of faculty development (Alstete, 2000). Merit and performance evaluation criteria that are not aligned with faculty development are generally perceived as punitive and serve to inhibit faculty confidence and faculty improvement. Benchmarks that echo the philosophy, principles, and assumptions of the university mission are central to the success of any faculty performance evaluation system. As the

external environment changes (declining state revenues and subsidies, competition for students, changing career opportunities for students, increasing numbers of under-prepared students, and so on) faculty need to believe in the constancy of the institution's commitment to the faculty. Only by carefully defining the benchmarks for performance evaluation and making them transparent can administrators demonstrate their commitment to faculty development and not faculty demise.

The Solution

The School Personnel Committee, which included equal representation from each academic unit decided to revise the existing merit system from scratch with a total over-haul. The Committee examined the merit documents from the other Schools within the College, as well as the University tenure and promotion template, using Stufflebeam's (2000) Personnel Evaluation System Meta-evaluation Checklist based on The Joint Committee Personnel Evaluation Standards (1988). The primary purpose for using the Standards was to correct deficiencies in current merit documents. The Personnel Evaluation Standards (1988) include four distinctive categories for review: (1) Propriety Standards (P), which focus on legal and ethical aspects of the evaluation system; (2) Utility Standards (U), which focus on the utilization and impact of evaluation results; (3) Feasibility Standards (F), which focus on the practicality, viability, and efficiency of evaluation systems; and (4) Accuracy Standards (A), which focus on technical accuracy of the evaluation conclusions.

The process used by the Personnel Committee for reevaluating the merit system was guided by a model suggested by the evaluation consultant recruited from the faculty ranks within the School. The model attempted to assure continuous feedback from the faculty in the School in bi-weekly meeting in an effort to improve the content and process of the evaluation striving toward quality and consensus. See Figure 1, page 8.

According to this model, the Personnel Committee used The Personnel Evaluation Standards to review the existing merit document. Each member of the committee was assigned one standard and reported how the existing document met that standard. Based on that information a new template, or rubric was developed, which was first presented to the entire faculty of the School

for feedback and again matched with the Standards, which resulted in an acceptable merit template or rubric.

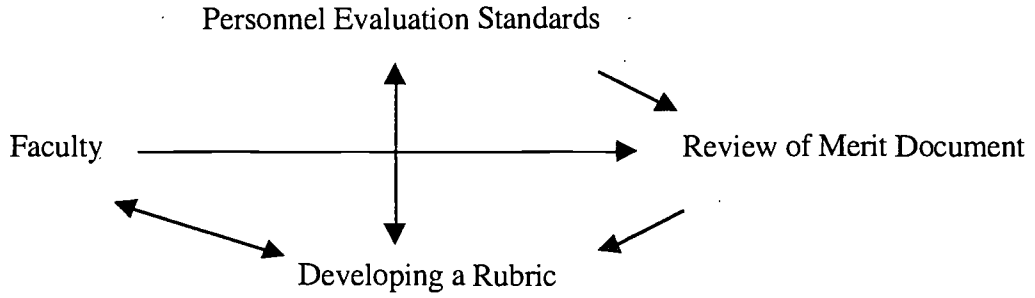

Figure 1: The continuous feedback model

Findings

When using the most applicable standards for merit decisions, several parts of the old merit system were found to be Fair to Poor, according to the Personnel Evaluation System Meta-evaluation Checklist (Stufflebeam, 2000). These were as follows for the Propriety Standards (P) (number of specific standards in parentheses): 1) Formal Evaluation Guidelines (P2), which state that the evaluation has to be grounded in "pertinent personnel policies" and assure that the evaluators deliver clear assessment findings that are consistent and equitable for all. 2) Conflict of Interest (P3), which should include procedures for controlling conflicts of interest at every level and assure that evaluators look at multiple data sources when evaluating the performance of faculty members. 3) Interactions with Evaluatees (P5), which instruct the evaluator to be sensitive and responsive to each faculty member's unique contribution to strengthen performance. Under the Utility Standards (U) the following three were found lacking: 1) Constructive Orientation (U1), which includes timely and constructive feedback to promote professionalism and improve performance. 2) Functional Reporting, (U4), involving clearly documented strengths and weaknesses. 3) Follow-up and Impact (U5), to help faculty understand the results and provide ways and means for professional development. The Feasibility Standards (F) showed up one standard

that was not applied at all: Political Viability (F2), this is where the School failed miserably, because there was an air of distrust among the faculty towards the Personnel Committee. The next four were lacking the following Accuracy Standards (A): 1) Documentation of Procedures (A3), which focuses on the "steps, forms, appeal procedures, reporting and follow-up procedures" that help make the system fair and equitable. 2) Valid Measurement (A4), which is the "single most important issue in the assessment of any evaluation process" but failed in the previous evaluation system that seemed to focus on the more quantifiable parts of the faculty role. 3) Bias Control (A7), by which the process should safeguard against irrelevant judgments such as personal likes and dislikes. 4) Monitoring Evaluation System (A8), which ensure that the evaluation system is periodically and systematically reviewed for any positive or negative impact.

The analysis of the most applicable standards above indicated that 11 out of 18 standards proposed for the merit, and tenure and promotion effort were not met. This confirmed that there was a problem with the old system. The solution was either incremental improvement or total revision. The School Personnel Committee opted for total revision using the Personnel Evaluation Standards. Not all faculty were happy with that decision.

The Never-ending Story

The School Personnel Committee systematically replaced the point allocation system of the old form with qualitative categories of merit. The new system set standards of excellence without looking at quantity. These qualitative categories were labeled "No Merit," "Merit," and "Exceeds Merit", and were also aligned with the University Merit and Tenure and Promotion documents.

The process was forced to a vote of the faculty of the School. More than three-quarters of the faculty body decided to try the new format for at least one year, after which revisions would be made. This action was perceived as a step in the appropriate direction, given that faculty performance evaluation was usually seen as an ill-defined process.

The move to accept the new evaluation system on a trial basis involved the willingness of the faculty to try out the new system. This was a challenge because of the insecurities and fears that

attended such a paradigm shift. Finding calm in the midst of this confusion was difficult. Each faculty member within each program was urged to contribute to the "document in process" to make the evaluation credible and valid. Wee-grounded performance indicators could only be determined with the support of all.

The story is not finished. The new academic year added new faculty hires to the programs adding different dynamics to the political realities. Whether the final processes and procedures articulated by the final document further the individual faculty agendas or further the welfare of the units and the faculty as a whole is yet to be determined.

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