

2000

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Gregory A. Smith

Liberty University, greg@liberty.edu

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Gregory A., "Evaluating Employee Performance: Insights from the Churches in Revelation 2-3" (2000). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Paper 65.

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Evaluating Employee Performance *Insights from the Churches in Revelation 2-3**

Gregory A. Smith

One of the most important elements of good personnel management is periodic performance evaluation. While I have been involved in performance evaluation for a number of years, both as evaluator and the subject of evaluation, only recently have I begun to consider it from a specifically biblical perspective. In my judgment, one of the most significant biblical passages bearing on the issue of evaluation is Revelation 2-3, where the risen Christ assesses the spiritual performance of the churches of Asia. It is the purpose of this article to discuss four principles of evaluation that are clearly visible in Christ's letters to these churches. Pastors and church administrators would do well to observe these guidelines when assessing their subordinates' performance.

PRINCIPLE #1: Effective evaluation is based on accurate information

Each of Christ's letters begins with the statement, "I know thy works." He makes his assessment of the churches' faithfulness from the vantage point of knowledge. The accuracy of Christ's evaluation is implied in his reference to himself as "the faithful and true witness" (3:14). He is holy and true (3:7), and he searches our innermost thoughts (2:23). He is clearly in a position to pass judgment. Similarly, if we are to give insightful feedback to our employees, we must have factual information to discuss. This means that we must observe their conduct repeatedly over time, making note of specific strengths and weaknesses.

Christ's evaluation was based not only on his knowledge of the churches' performance, but on his understanding of their unique situations. He knew of the blasphemy of "the synagogue of Satan" in Smyrna and Philadelphia (2:9; 3:9). He took into account the fact that Pergamos was Satan's dwelling place (2:13). It follows from these facts that, as managers, we should not be oblivious to the diverse factors that may impact our employees' performance. Some staff members face difficult challenges related to health, family relations, finances, and other areas of personal life, and these cannot help but impact their professional lives. While we cannot excuse unfaithful conduct, we should be patient with those whose personal difficulties hinder the performance of their professional duties.

PRINCIPLE #2: Effective evaluation recognizes both positive and negative performance

Evaluation should reflect the reality that an employee's performance record combines both satisfactory and unsatisfactory elements. This is perhaps nowhere seen more clearly than in Christ's letter to the Ephesian church. He begins with praise: "I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil ..." (2:2). He proceeds with criticism: "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love" (2:4). He concludes with a word of appreciation: "But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate" (2:6). As managers we would do well to package necessary criticism between statements of approbation.

Of course, the content of a performance review may vary widely, depending on the conduct of the employee. Two of Christ's letters—those addressed to Smyrna and Philadelphia—contain no criticism. The letters to Sardis and Laodicea, however, are quite judgmental. The other three messages are a mixture of positive and negative comments. Regardless of the message we have to share with a given employee, we can offer it in a spirit of love and fellowship, following Christ's example. His stinging criticism of the Laodicean congregation included a reminder of his abiding love and an invitation to restored fellowship through repentance (3:19-20).

*Reprinted from *The Baptist Preacher*, March/April 2000: 23+.

PRINCIPLE #3: Effective evaluation increases awareness of accountability

When properly carried out, a performance evaluation heightens a subordinate's sense of responsibility to his or her supervisor. The notion of accountability is obvious in Christ's assurance to the church at Thyatira: "I will give unto every one of you according to your works" (2:23). It is implicit in the words that appear near the end of each of the seven letters: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." When we offer feedback to our staff, we do so with the purpose of being heard. Performance reviews allow us the opportunity to define exactly what we expect of our subordinates, thereby creating an accountability structure.

The accountability of the churches to Christ is further reinforced by the way he identifies himself at the beginning of each letter. For example, he characterizes himself as "the first and the last" (2:8), "the Son of God" (2:18), and "the beginning of the creation of God" (3:14). He boldly asserts that he "openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth" (3:7). Each of these is a statement of Christ's authority over the local church. While we certainly do not have the credentials that Christ has, we have authority in that he has charged us with spiritual responsibility. While we have no right to be despotic, we bear authority and should subtly remind our subordinates of this fact.

PRINCIPLE #4: Effective evaluation provides incentives for improved performance

The primary goal of performance evaluation is improved performance. Effective evaluation provides both negative and positive incentives for improvement. A negative incentive is implicit in Christ's instruction to the church at Ephesus: "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I ... will remove thy candlestick out of his place ..." (2:5; cf. 2:16). Some performance reviews must include a warning that negative consequences will follow if improvement is not made. However, the use of positive incentives is preferable.

Christ offers a positive incentive in his promise to the church at Smyrna: "be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life" (2:10; cf. 3:11). In addition, each letter contains a pledge of future blessing for those who overcome. True believers are enjoined to continued faithfulness through the assurance of eternal reward. As managers we do well to offer positive incentives to our subordinates. These may take many forms, such as the promise of increased responsibility, financial advancement, or closer fellowship with the supervisor. Of course, all who engage in ministry should share in the expectation of divine reward both in time and in eternity.

In summary, Christ's messages to the churches of Asia provide useful guidelines for performance evaluation in the context of ministry. Church leaders who observe these principles nurture the growth of their employees as well as that of their churches. Performance evaluation is an effective means of developing and maintaining an awareness of our ultimate accountability to God.