

What I've Learned (and am still learning) About Ministry Evaluations

Over the past 20 years, I've developed this love-hate relationship with ministry evaluations (aka, performance reviews). On the one hand, I "hate" them because they annually intrude on my calendar pleading for time and attention. And on the other, I "love" them because I have come to realize that they are one of the most significant contributors to leadership development and ministry momentum.

Throughout the years, I've attempted to become a student of the ministry evaluation process, desiring each year to platform an approach more robust than the one before, and in that endeavor have started my own personal 'collection' of things that I have learned. Take a look.

Check your motives. When I consider the big picture of ministry evaluation, as a supervisor, I ultimately have to return to the motive of my heart. It is everything. Like a ballast to a sailboat, if your sincere desire is for the development of your direct report, then you will find the balance that will maximize this important opportunity.

Think STEWARDSHIP. Often before I sit down with a person for a time of ministry evaluation, I will reflect on the responsibility of stewardship for which it calls. I go to a quiet place in my heart and consider how blessed I am to speak into the life and leadership of another person. I envision the time like a box of fine china marked "handle with care."

Write it down. A ministry evaluation is a very deliberate and intentional process and, as such, requires the precision that comes from writing it down. The impact of an evaluation is markedly enhanced in a carefully worded document. As a written document, it not only has "weight" in the moment, but even more so as the person reflects on it in the ensuing days.

Emphasize affirmation. Of the 5-6 categories in the ministry evaluation document that I have developed through the years, the first (and longest) one is **AFFIRMATION**. This section is a bulleted list of several areas of praise that I want to call out. For example, "Steve is a man who passionately pursues his walk with God" or "Judy is a pastor who is highly effective in developing leaders."

Be honest. It is better NOT to do an evaluation than to do one that is less than honest. As a supervisor, and more importantly, as a leader, you owe it to your direct report to speak the truth in love. A ministry evaluation is the perfect opportunity to do so because it comes with a built-in expectation of candid feedback. Don't miss the moment.

Be ready. Teeing up a tough conversation in a ministry evaluation takes concerted effort, but is well worth the investment. When it comes to addressing a difficult topic, thinking through and, at times, scripting your words can make a huge difference. For example, "Jim, I'd like to talk about a topic that I believe is essential to your ongoing development as a leader. I trust you will hear my heart and my commitment to you as we discuss it together."

Invite input. In chasing down a difficult topic, often it is helpful to launch the discussion by putting a question on the table. For example, "Susan, as I read through the comments submitted by some of your 'third party'

evaluators, there is a consistent theme about your reluctance to accept the input of other people. What's going on here? Why do you think they would share that comment?"

Prioritize SELF-evaluation. Perhaps the most valuable lesson I have learned in my years of doing ministry evaluation is the strategic place of self-evaluation. Every ministry evaluation process begins with the person assessing their own life and leadership using a set of reflective questions. At minimum, two things will happen. First, you will discover with new intensity both the joys and frustrations being faced by this person. And second, you will find that the vast majority of the challenging topics that need to be vetted are initiated by the person himself.

Establish benchmarks. One of the many values of a ministry evaluation is the "paper trail" that it creates—a formal and written track record of one's performance. This historical record is particularly helpful (not to mention critical when it comes to meeting HR standards) when the need arises to substantiate that there is an ongoing pattern of sub-par performance and it is time to consider some remedial steps or a change in employment status.

Keep a tight focus. Every ministry evaluation process needs to have a clear statement of what the person needs to do to continue the (lifelong) process of development. Through the years, I have found that this should be limited to 1-2 items. At least one item, because EVERYONE is a 'work in progress' and needs to know what their next step is. And no more than two items so that there is the ability to bring strategic attention to the area most in need of development.

Stay current. When all is said and done, a ministry evaluation should contain no "surprises." Surprises ultimately reveal that the supervisor has not sustained an ongoing dialogue about the direct report's effectiveness. A ministry evaluation is the time to reintroduce important themes and to mutually establish the game plan for addressing them.

Look for patterns. In evaluating people, a wise supervisor will probe for patterns, not the "one-offs." It is important to identify the actions and attitudes that are CONSISTENTLY reflected in a person's life and ministry. Those are the ones worthy of deliberation.

I trust these thoughts are helpful to you. While ministry evaluations take a lot of time and attention, the ROI is inarguable. And most of all, when done right, it is a gift to those God has entrusted to your care.