

How Evidence Based Performance Measures© Overcome the Flaws of Both Traditional and Conversational Performance Assessments

Francie Dalton*

How is performance actually measured in your organization? Based on relationships or memory? Based on the rater's gut feel or Jack Welch's 20/70/10 rule? Perhaps you would agree that any of these may be contributing to involuntary turnover. This article will offer an alternative that enables objective assessments by establishing both quantitative and qualitative measures before performance even begins. Much like the advance predictive planning and budgeting that appends to the expertise of compensation and benefits professionals, Evidence Based Performance Measures© (EBPM) is a way of evaluating performance based on the prospectively, measurably, documented needs of your team/department/organization. We will examine the elements of EBPM with guidance for proper use, five common mistakes in crafting expectations with corrective protocols, before and after examples, benefits of use, and recommendations for overcoming predictable resistance to the use of EBPM.

INTRODUCTION

Let us begin with a definition of the term "assessment." Within the context of performance

management, we appraise so that we can form an opinion and make a judgement. Traditionally, we use two methods for making these assessments: observation and communication—both of which are frequently inadequate and misleading. Worse still, the degree to which these methods permit fiction to masquerade as fact is likely to remain perpetually invisible to raters. The result? Those who supervise and assess others do not always know what they do not know.

Two scenarios will help demonstrate this point. First, consider the following regarding observation. Imagine you have two VPs: Dick and Jane. In walking down the hall, you observe Dick leaning back in his chair with his feet up on his desk, hands behind his head, staring out of the window. You shake your head in disgust, concluding that Dick is a goldbricker. You would like to dismiss him immediately, but instead you make a mental note to see human resources (HR) about taking action. Continuing down the hall a bit further, you observe Jane. She is switching back and forth between two calls, relying on a single ear bud for the cell call, and covering the receiver that is scrunched against

*FRANCIE DALTON, CMC, is founder and president of Dalton Alliances, LLC, a premier business consultancy specializing in the management, performance, and behavioral sciences. She is an award-winning instructor at Georgetown University and is an honorably discharged veteran of the U.S. Army Military Intelligence Service. Find her at daltonalliances.com, fmaldalton@daltonalliances.com, and 410-802-6329.

her other shoulder while typing notes on her laptop and giving instructions to her assistant. You cannot help but smile. You would like to clone her immediately. Jane gives new meaning to the word “multitasking,” setting an example you wish everyone would follow.

Let us be clear here. There is no debating what you saw. It is an absolute fact that Dick was relaxing and Jane was multitasking. No argument there. What you cannot know, however, despite direct observation, is that Dick just got the biggest company in your industry to become a client and is taking a few moments to savor it, while Jane, having missed six deadlines in a row, is trying frantically not to miss another. So much for “observation” as a reliable method of assessment.

Let us shift now to communication. For this scenario, imagine your two subordinates are Joe and Sally. Let us say you have assigned them a task on which they must work together. A few weeks later, you see Joe in the lobby. In an effort to make casual conversation, you inquire about the progress of the project.

Joe hesitates in responding to your question just long enough to give you pause. “Um, it’s going fine, boss; it’ll be just fine,” he says, with a brave smile. Suspicious now, you ask Joe if there is a problem. Much too quickly, he replies that “Everything is fine—just fine. Not to worry. Everything is going to be all right.” Something in his tone is unconvincing, and shortly thereafter, you set up a meeting with him. As he settles into the chair in your office, you once again ask whether there are any problems with the project. Joe hesitates just a fraction of a moment too long. You ask the next logical question: “Is Sally carrying her fair share of the weight?” “I didn’t say she wasn’t carrying her weight!” he replies hotly. “Look Joe,” you say. “Something is clearly awry. Let’s call Sally in and see if we can get it worked out together.” As you begin to make the

call, Joe begs you not to intervene, saying that, for the sake of his future working relationship with Sally, he would rather handle his issues on his own. He assures you that he will come to you if he is not successful.

Because Joe resisted your probing and because he rallied to the defense of his co-worker, you do not doubt him for a moment. You come away from that conversation thinking the world of Joe and being apprehensive about Sally. But take a moment and consider what actually occurred during the conversation. Joe never said that Sally was not carrying her weight. You merely inferred as much from Joe’s artful intimations. Were you manipulated? Could Joe have had his own agenda? So much for communication as a reliable method of assessment.

Just as the assessments made in these scenarios were flawed because they were based on mere observation or communication, so too is supervisory decision-making flawed when it is based on these traditional methods of assessment. Compounding this already two-tiered problem is the fact that when supervisors make these flawed assessments, they are unaware of their error, so there is no motivation to change the method of assessment. The question becomes: If you cannot trust what you see and cannot trust what you are told, how are you to assess accurately and what tools can help you do so?

Proof of performance or the absence thereof—that is what you get when performance expectations are infused with EBPM. Properly constructed, performance measures describe targeted outcomes in both quantitative and qualitative terms, permitting an objective assessment of performance. As a result, rather than speaking of what seems to be so or how one feels about the performance of a department, subordinate, or vendor, EBPM-infused performance measures provide objective evidence.

Establishing valid performance measures is not easy. But the investment pays tremendous dividends. Individuals can prove their value to their organizations and supervisors can justify rewarding or trimming staff; performance reviews can be factual and unemotional; and organizations can provide evidence that validates their performance against mission.

Regarding the use of EBPM, we will cover the following components: (1) the basics: three overarching elements with related criteria; (2) the five most common mistakes with solutions as well as before and after examples; (3) the benefits of using EBPM, and (4) overcoming resistance to the use of EBPM.

There are three elements to effective performance measures, and you are no doubt familiar with all of them: goals, objectives, and action plans. However, familiarity is not synonymous with proper use, and this article will reveal the otherwise elusive impacts of proper use. Notably, in over 30 years of business consulting, I have found that these three elements are often unclear and rarely measurably stated, causing uncertainty and confusion, resulting in less than desired performance and often, voluntary turnover. A reasonable analogy might be to consider the level of chaos that would ensue if a key position within compensation and benefits was staffed by someone who knew all the buzz words but could not, or did not want to, craft the concepts into measurable deliverables for their subordinates.

THE BASICS WITH CRITERIA

Goals are the first of the three components. Each goal should measurably establish the outcome/result to be achieved but should not include how the goal is to be achieved. The second component—objectives—are subordinate to goals, and each should measurably depict the major undertakings/methods by which a single

goal is to be achieved. The third component—action plan items—are subordinate to objectives, and should depict the tactics necessary to achieving a single objective. In crafting these elements, several criteria must be met.

Common in business vernacular is that goals must be measurable, achievable, and time-specific. In fact, those criteria apply as well to objectives and action plans. Similarly, measurability is often presumed to be exclusively quantitative (for example, absolute values, percentages, ratios). Almost always overlooked is the use of qualitative measures. As will be made clear in this article, qualitative measures (for example, per specifications, supervisor-prioritized, without eroding, relevant, approved, in collaboration with) can produce the needed level of specificity when quantitative measures are not feasible.

Achievability is meant to ensure that targets are practical, while requiring the appropriate degree of stretching. Time-specific means what it sounds like: appended to each element should be some form of deadline. Potentially counterintuitive examples include: by date to be determined, once X is completed; within X days after Z occurs, by a to-be-agreed-to date.

Succinctness is another criterion, requiring that no single element be more than one brief sentence. Extended verbiage may indicate that the author is either: (1) engaged in describing a planning process rather than in assigning performance measures, or (2) combining all three elements into one statement. Here is an actual example written by a senior executive at a large agency, which demonstrates the need for succinctness. Imagine that you report to the person who wrote this. Would you know what is expected of you? Would you be able to discern how your performance would be assessed?

Understanding that long term goal setting typi-

cally takes place a few years before desired results are achieved and that there is a required patience as the evidence rolls in based on the time that is sometimes required to adapt to the new ways, approach implementation in a timely way and alter the new methods when they do not support the desired outcome, without changing too often.

Goal statements frequently include the word “and.” This often results in combining multiple outcomes into a single statement. Instead, each goal statement should refer to a single outcome; each objective statement should refer to a single substantial contribution to the goal; each action plan item should refer to a single objective. The one exception that allows for the use of “and” is when the method of achievement is identical. Here is an actual example, again written by a senior executive, demonstrating the need for the proper use of “and.” To protect anonymity, capital letters have been used to represent deliverables/projects. Again, imagine that you report to the person who wrote this. Would you understand what is expected of you? Would you be able to discern the criteria against which you’d be assessed?

Provide at least 3 Xs and 4Ys during the year that lead to the development of both A and B projects which results in the identification and adoption of successful practices and activities in both projects and operations and the development of efficient and effective plans of action for showcasing innovative and unique initiatives creating best practice in the functional area for replication.

I am often asked how many goals one should have. The right number of goals is that which, cumulatively, achieves the desired impact. The right number of objectives is the number that, by definition, achieves the referent goal. Similarly, the right number of action plan items is the number that, by definition, achieves the referent objective.

Also important to note is that goals, objectives, and action plans are not synonymous with job descriptions. I realize this point may seem beneath the knowledge and experience of the

august readers of the *Journal of Compensation and Benefits*. However, on numerous occasions, when writing goals for a subordinate, supervisors often lift the list of “responsibilities” out of the job description and assume they suffice as goals. In stark contrast, goals should be specific to a given review period and should describe in measurable terms what constitutes alignment with each expected outcome for that review period.

Another often-asked question is about team goals. These should be written to crystalize both individual and group accountability. The team itself should have an overarching goal statement that clarifies the outcome for which the team was formed to achieve. Each individual team member should have their own goals, objectives, and action plan items, the achievement of which measurably contributes to the team goal.

THE FIVE MOST COMMON MISTAKES AND SOLUTIONS

In this section, we will demonstrate how word choices that regularly appear in performance expectations impact the clarity of expectations and therefore the degree of alignment with expectations. Intelligent, experienced, reasonable adults can disagree about the meaning of such words. Those who use them become complicit in receiving suboptimal work products from their subordinates. If instead, if performance expectations are infused with EBPM, quantitative and qualitative measures can replace ambiguous wording.

Unclear Use of Adjectives

Common examples include: top quality, cost-effective, excellent, successful, appropriate, efficient, optimal, and the like:

- **Before:** Ensure the successful orientation of 4 new Directors by (date). Since, as written, success can only be subjectively assessed, we need a solution.

- **Solution:** Pose the FIB (fill-in-the-blank) question to the author: “The orientation of 4 new Directors will be successful if _____?”
- **After:** Ensure the orientation of four new directors aligns with the attached specifications. (The last five words constitute a qualitative measure.)

Unclear Use of Verbs

Common examples include: promote, support, educate, attend, address, participate, optimize, and the like:

- **Before:** Attend the ABC meeting on (date). Since warming a seat isn’t an outcome, we need a solution.
- **Solution:** Pose permutations of the WHY question to the author: “The purpose of my attendance at the ABC meeting is to . . .?”
- **After:** Document for supervisory review all decisions made and not made at the ABC meeting by (date).

Unclear Use of Prepositions

Typical examples include the use of: to, through, by, in order to. These inappropriately combine goals and objectives:

- **Before:** Implement a price reduction to retain our competitive position. (Since as phrased, there is only one method to help retain competitive position, prohibiting any suggestions for alternatives, we need a solution.)
- **Solution:** Separate the outcome from the method.
- **After:** Outcome: Retain our competitive position. Method #1: Implement the approved price reduction (replacing “a price

reduction” with “the approved price reduction” exemplifies the importance of a qualitative measure).

Unclear Comparison Words

Among the five common mistakes in developing performance expectations, the unclear use of comparison words is the most frequent. Examples include: increase, decrease, expand, reduce, more, better, strengthen, advance, enhance, faster, higher, and the like. These should not appear unless the relevant baseline and target are also stated:

- **Before:** Increase in attendance at the 2026 annual conference. (Since, as phrased, it is unclear what constitutes the desired increase over what base year, we need a solution.)
- **Solution:** Add the baseline year and the targeted increase.
- **After:** Increase C-level attendance at the 2026 annual conference by 20% over 2025. (Adding the type of attendee to which the 20% increase refers exemplifies the importance of a qualitative measure.)

Responsibility that Exceeds Authority

The last of the five common mistakes in developing performance expectations assigning a goal over which one’s subordinate has little to no control. Examples include: retain all key employees for the next three years; ensure all employees apply for the XYZ award; fill all 12 open positions within the next 14 days. What is reasonable and fair, however, is to impose accountability for the flawless execution of a comprehensive strategy that maximizes the likelihood that Congress will decide as desired. If the strategy is approved by the supervisor as being comprehensive, and it is flawlessly executed, whether

the bill passes or not is not a valid measure of performance:

- **Before:** By (date), ensure that Congress passes the ABC bill. (Since it is neither reasonable nor fair to hold someone accountable for outcomes beyond their control, we need a solution.)
- **Solution:** Preface the desired outcome with the words “work toward.”
- **After:** Work toward ensuring that Congress passes the ABC bill by (date).

I have CEO clients who eschew this option, claiming that “work toward” provides too much wiggle room. However, it must be acknowledged that there will always be desired outcomes of high priority that exceed the level of influence and control that one has over them. If an employee develops a powerful and impressively comprehensive strategy and implements it flawlessly, why should they be assessed as having failed in, for example, reducing voluntary turnover to single digits this year, tripling the sales of the previous year, ensuring certain political outcomes, launching a marketing plan that ensures a 30% increase in contracts for service, and so forth. In such cases, accountability should only be imposed for that which can actually be controlled. This in no way lets anyone off the hook for the flawless execution of a strategy that has been approved as: (1) comprehensive, and (2) maximizing the likelihood of the desired outcome.

OVERCOMING RESISTANCE

As demonstrated above, the incorporation of EBPM into performance expectations fundamentally changes how the expectations are phrased and requires an array of unfamiliar tools to ensure measurability. The reluctance you will encounter in establishing EBPM may prove to be

stronger than anticipated. The primary reason for this is that EBPM is likely to be imputed with ill intent, viewed as a process that supplants, rather than augments, supervisory assessments of subordinates. Additionally, the establishment of EBPM is a fairly tedious process for each person involved. It is reasonable for each supervisor to require six to eight hours of 1:1 coaching to achieve fluency with the process.

Bear in mind that it is the initial effort that is time-consuming. Subsequent iterations are much easier to produce since the templates already exist. Often, the only changes required year-to-year involve absolute values, percentages, deadlines, names of programs, and other such variables. Even as new goals are added, the template language for measurable expression will already have been established. And, as with anything, competence and speed of execution increase with experience.

The process of establishing EBPM imposes additional work and increased scrutiny on supervisors. Emotional, rather than logical, resistance should be expected. Some may view the adoption of EBPM as an indication that their judgement in assessing their staff is not trusted. But do not give up. Here are several examples of how you can neutralize resistance and expedite compliance: (1) take every opportunity to conspicuously demonstrate how you have incorporated EBPM into your own performance expectations; (2) acknowledge as valid the complaints regarding the time and tedium needed to apply EBPM; (3) retain an EBPM expert to work collaboratively with those who are struggling with or resisting the incorporation of EBPM into their targeted outcomes, as this will substantially accelerate the process; and (4) consider selecting a few employees to complete a train-the-trainer course to become internal champions, fluent in the application of EBPM and willing to help others complete the process.

BENEFITS OF ESTABLISHING EBPM

To the extent mediocre performance is allowed to remain in place at your organization, EBPM will provide supervisors with the evidence needed for pruning.

In reviewing the performance of others, it is easy to rely on what you want to be so; it is equally easy to be swayed by the opinions of others. EBPM subordinates emotion to evidence, helping you assess the performance of others based on facts.

Supervisors may have trouble confronting poor performance. It can be tough to find the words to articulate what needs to be said about substandard performance. EBPM eases this process by expressing expectations in a measurable way. Rather than having a conversation about feelings, rater and ratee are talking about outcomes that have been explicitly defined, supported by objectives that have also been explicitly defined. Progress is easily discernable by referring to the status of action plan items and objectives throughout the performance period.

Performance reviews are often stressful because of disagreement between what the rater expected and what the ratee understood as the deliverable. EBPM eliminates this problem by ensuring that expectations are agreed to at the beginning of the performance period.

Fairness in the review process is often an issue, in large part because supervisors are not always in agreement regarding the criteria for assigning ratings. EBPM establishes the validity of disparate rating criteria since crafting indisputably explicit expectations customized to each ratee is at the core of EBPM.

One of the most heartening findings about the use of EBPM is the degree to which it positively affects morale. There are three reasons for this:

1. EBPM permits employees, usually for the first time, to understand their contribution to the organization and to articulate it. They *know* when they are succeeding; they realize that they *can* influence the success of the organization.
2. Individual contributions and accomplishments are more visible. Achievements are less likely to be overlooked.
3. Having explicit targets to strive toward is motivating per se and is even more so when one works with others who also are striving for those targets. The adoption of EBPM energizes employees. Clear evidence of their achievements makes them proud to have generated measurable results, and they *want* to be accountable.

Organizational Readiness for EBPM

Implementing EBPM involves considerable scrutiny, which implies the expectation of change. For that reason alone, EBPM is not likely to be warmly welcomed initially. Carefully assess your own commitment level regarding the process of implementing EBPM. Consider the costs involved in implementing EBPM. I refer here not to monetary costs, but to emotional costs, which may be significant. So let us examine specifically what you are signing up for if you move forward with the implementation of EBPM. These five fundamental truths about scrutiny are worthy of reflection in determining your organizational readiness for EBPM:

- **Truth #1:** The more you need scrutiny, the less you want it. Being put under a microscope is tough enough; if you know your performance is less than optimal, scrutiny becomes excruciating and can bring out the worst in our behavior. If you wait to submit to scrutiny until you really need it, it will be exponentially more painful.

- **Truth #2:** The more successful you become, the less you feel you need scrutiny. In sharing this truth, there is no intention to diminish the reader's success to date. Instead, the intention is to invite your focus away from how good you are at the moment and focus instead on how good you could be if . . .
- **Truth #3:** The more one's colleagues need scrutiny from one another, the less likely it will be provided. Reticence to provide constructive critique could be interpreted as disinterest in helping others succeed. EBPM illuminates that organizational success is a shared result and providing constructive feedback to one another is a fiduciary responsibility.
- **Truth #4:** The more you resist scrutiny, the more at risk you become. Scrutiny imposes boundaries, clarifies expectations, provides the parameters within which we are to function to be successful in a given organization, and identifies the boundaries beyond which we are at greater risk. In application, scrutiny functions like a fence does for a beloved pet. If you persist in circumventing your "scrutiny fences," the use of EBPM will ensure you will do so with significantly greater awareness of the risk.
- **Truth #5:** The more you embrace scrutiny, the more uncomfortable you will be, since implicit in the imposition of scrutiny is the expectation of change. Scrutiny reveals what is not that should be and what is that should not be. It illuminates what is out of alignment and reveals the need for action

to reestablish alignment. Subordinating scrutiny to comfort maintains the status quo; subordinating comfort to scrutiny catalyzes needed adjustments.

An openness to scrutiny—better yet, a welcoming of it—along with a willingness to change despite the attendant discomforts, affords a state of being that few professionals and few organizations enjoy with any degree of longevity: the state of alignment. Although the tedium of implementing EBPM is indeed considerable, the tedium is temporary, and the benefits of being in a state of alignment more than offset the requisite organizational endurance.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, comfort cannot be the yardstick by which we measure success, whether personally or organizationally. Comfort simply is not how we as professionals get to the top of our game, and it is not how we lead our organizations to peak performance. Indeed, the more we mature, the more we realize that it is the very antithesis of comfort that produces success.

My petition is that you be a willing, alert participant in a dual duel with the twin concepts of scrutiny and change, and that you influence the culture of your organization to do so as well. Yes, it is consistent with human nature to resist scrutiny and change, and yes, leading your employees through their resistance to EBPM-related changes will require commitment and stamina. But it is a worthy effort, because in their submission to consistent scrutiny, in their submission to change, lies their best results, their best career, and their best self.