Annual Performance Evaluations with a Positive Twist

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In earlier columns we have discussed the use of the formula PAR (Problem + Action + Result) as a construct to determine accomplishments and from them competencies. Deconstructing the competencies yields a cluster of generic skills and traits, which can help determine a career path. The results of PAR work can then be used as bullet points in executive summaries, and as the basis for “stories” in interviews. Behavioral interviews specify and might read, “Chaired departmental program review for re-accreditation, which yielded a cluster of generic criteria for family medicine residents based on demonstrated competencies in a variety of areas suggested by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME). Their report provided guidelines for developing and demonstrating knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Clifton and Harter give another rationale for the focus on strengths, writing, “When people become aware of their talents, through measurement and feedback, they have a strong position from which to view their potential. They can begin to enlarge their awareness of their talents with knowledge and skills to develop strengths.” Information such as the above and feedback from clients has led to our recommendation to use the PAR work approach in preparing oneself for an annual evaluation. Reviewing PARs for the past year and deconstructing them as suggested provides one with an understanding of his or her competencies. Moreover, the PAR approach enables preparation of a performance report that is focused on results or outcomes, rather than being the all-too-common list of activities conducted during the year.

Moving from PAR to CAR for Performance Management

To focus on goals for the coming year, we find it helpful to substitute C for P and use the acronym CAR. Challenges, problems, opportunities or issues can be set, with details of the Action to be taken and the Results expected. This acronym, CAR, implies forward movement and is thus distinguished from past accomplishments. In our
framework, the PAR then becomes a focus on Past Problems, opportunities, issues or challenges and CAR on Current/future challenges, opportunities, issues, or problems.

One to several CARs can be written for each area to be appraised—such as teaching, research, service, and scholarship. The amount of detail and degree of “stretch” in the goals is up to you and your supervisor to determine—whether your CAR is a high-performance Porsche or a reliable and efficient Prius.

Here are a couple of examples that depict the basic format:

❖ Scholarship
  ❖ Challenge—Submit two articles for publication.
  ❖ Action—Complete data collection and draft manuscripts for intradepartmental review.
  ❖ Results—Submit articles to the Journal of XXX by April 1.

❖ Teaching
  ❖ Challenge—Develop integrated curriculum for pathology course.
  ❖ Action—Collect and review curriculum from several other institutions; convene small task force to discuss and draft proposal.
  ❖ Result—Submit new curriculum to department chair by April 30.

These statements are written in the present tense, are grounded in your history, represent a preferred future, and move toward positive accomplishments and change that you desire for your career. The statements also help you identify aspects of your work that ultimately will make you feel good about yourself. Finally, the work of constructing your CARs helps to define areas on which to focused up in the following year as you do your yearly reflection, with questions such as: How much of my current position allows me to use the skills that I enjoy? Are there ways that I can build more of this into my current job?

What follows is a “live” example prepared for an annual performance discussion with a supervisor:

During the past year, a department chair was dealing with resource allocation issues. A faculty member took it upon herself to identify the problem (P); faculty members were unhappy that research space allocation in the department was inconsistent. She evaluated the current allocation, put together a task force of faculty who researched what other departments had done, designed a quantitative methodology to assign research space based on funding and mission, discussed alternatives, and achieved buy-in from every member of the department (A). She then presented to the chair a solution that completely solved the problem, and demonstrated to members of the department that their concerns had been heard and the issue was being handled in a transparent manner. The new system was considered fair and was implemented as a departmental policy (R).

This successful PAR resulted in the faculty member identifying skills she had used for this task, and therefore being asked to handle other issues that would require similar skill sets during the following year. In the goals for the year, the faculty member was asked to take on the challenge of leading a task force to reorganize the student educational facilities to better meet the needs of students and faculty. Her Action plan involved bringing together all stakeholders, assessing needs in relation to existing facilities (new construction was not an option), and developing a satisfactory plan. The expected Result was that student educational resources would reside in a more efficient and suitable environment, making both teaching and learning more pleasant and effective. This A and R would also increase visibility for the faculty member, a requirement for career advancement at her institution.

This accomplishment did not “fit” in the normal CV template, and therefore could not be formally recorded as an “accomplishment” by the faculty member for the previous year in that format. By using the PAR statement and deconstruction (in addition to the institution’s standard annual review format), the faculty member’s accomplishment and skills were clearly identified and formally documented in her personnel file, therefore also coming to the attention of the administration. This will likely result in greater opportunities for the faculty member in the future.

For this process to be effective, it is important for the faculty member to focus on the actual Results that have occurred, and not merely on the Activities or Action. In the example above, space allocation (a notoriously touchy subject) was achieved in an equitable manner, satisfactory to all. Another Result might be enhanced departmental ability to obtaining extramural funding.

We believe that the use of the PAR process in performance appraisal adds a much-needed dimension to the traditional faculty–chair meeting. The process enables faculty and their supervisors to identify, and then to acknowledge, faculty members’ concrete results-oriented contributions to the school—traditional peer-reviewed publications and grants, clinical service, or teaching—as well as nontraditional contributions that advance the missions of the school. As recently highlighted by an AAMC Consensus...
Meeting on documenting and evaluating contributions in education, there is a great need for medical schools to develop methods that document and value contributions such as advising, mentoring, directing courses, and the like.8

Some internal CV report templates allow for short verbiage to describe such contributions, and we suggest that more schools could usefully adopt this process as an optional component of the annual review. Formal inclusion would benefit all parties:

❖ The faculty member gets credit for a task well done, yet not easily added to a traditional CV, and takes personal satisfaction in the accomplishment. Furthermore, the deconstruction allows the faculty member to identify skills and strengths that can be developed further.

❖ The department benefits from faculty willingness to take on projects that otherwise would not be considered worth their time and effort (“What do I get out of doing this?”).

❖ The school, which always benefits from the success of its faculty, will identify a pool of talented individuals with specific skills that may be invited to participate in important processes that enhance the school’s mission.

This change in performance appraisal will require a shift to focus on how to document the outcomes, rather than just listing the activities in which a faculty member is involved. For example, it is not sufficient to note that one served on the IRB committee; for this to be used as an accomplishment, the faculty member must focus on what was accomplished that year. This requires considering elements such as: Was the process streamlined so that time from application submission to approval was shortened? Were there improved explanations of what was needed in IRB applications, so that fewer resubmissions were required?

This recommended approach for using PAR for past accomplishments and CAR for current and future challenges aligns with the values of Appreciative Inquiry. One model uses the appreciative approach to determine strategic objectives by analyzing Strengths and Opportunities, Action, and Result.9 The CAR focus is thus strength-based, and one is being valued for contributions as well as potential. Your annual review becomes a valuation rather than an evaluation—built on strengths rather than deficits.

References

3. Morahan PS, Katz JK. We’d like to have an initial interview with your Academic Physician & Scientist October 2005:2–3.