

Drive Performance, Not Opinions: Sonoma County's Results-Based Performance Management Evaluation System

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) developed the Results-Based Performance Management (RPM) evaluation system to establish performance reviews that focus on enhancing employees' professional development with a data-driven approach. RPM utilizes the moving average of performance for an employee's cohort to determine if the individual is below, meeting, or exceeding performance standards. Sonoma HSD invested

much of their time strategizing which criteria would most accurately depict employee performance. These decisions included agency stakeholders' input to create buy-in, equity, and continuous improvement throughout the department. RPM focuses on quality measures, but keeps data collection simple and close to the worker by connecting individual performance to organizational and program goals.

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Introduction

Sonoma County's Results-Based Performance Management (RPM) evaluation system has turned the traditional box-checking, subjective narrative performance review on its head. According to Michael Schrage, David Kiron, Bryan Hancock, and Raffaele Brechi of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) *Sloan Management Review*, "performance management's longtime reliance on manager opinion, subjective observation, and intuition are being replaced by reliance on data" (2019). In contrast to these traditional methods of employee review, RPM establishes clear expectations and standards of performance for all employees completing the same type of work. Clarifying expectations minimizes the interference of potential bias or subjective reviews because the feedback is data-driven. RPM takes guesswork out of the picture for both the employee and the evaluator. The RPM tool highlights exceptional performers, recognizes those who are meeting performance standards, and illuminates opportunities and areas of improvement.

Background

Sonoma County took this paradigm shift towards a more data-driven performance review while participating in the UC Davis Supervisors Effectiveness Training Program nearly three years ago. The training helped leaders in the county realize the importance of clarifying expectations among supervisors and staff while engaging in consistent feedback to guide performance towards set baselines.

Around this same time, I was promoted to an eligibility work supervisor in Contra Costa County and became immediately responsible for carrying out progress reports for two employees on 'improvement needed' status. At that time, I realized the value of clear expectations as I began to receive a myriad of recommendations from management, personnel, and colleagues. Although well-meaning, these recommendations often conflicted with one another. Within a local government agency, the employee performance evaluation should encourage all civil staff members to grow professionally and to reach their full potential, serving the agency's larger goal of employee training and development (Pynes, 2013, p. 312).

RPM fulfills this purpose by evaluating employee performance from a forward-looking perspective. Upon hire, the employee receives a performance planner that the supervisor and employee complete together. The performance planner identifies the performance standards specific to their position and captures the employee's goals via the professional development plan. The professional development plan specifies objectives designed to improve, maintain, or develop the employee's competencies, knowledge, skills, and abilities for the current position or to prepare the employee for future career advancement opportunities.

The RPM evaluation also reviews whether the employee meets the Sonoma County Human Services Department's Gold Standards for professional conduct, attendance, and use of equipment

and supplies, which all human services employees must observe. The performance evaluation period is immediately underway and forward-looking. RPM establishes accountability for the employee's everyday performance and motivates the employee to develop competencies in other areas that promote professional growth. Employees who receive frequent feedback are more aware of their performance levels, including specific areas of improvement they need to target.

Development

To develop the RPM evaluation system, Sonoma County entrusted the project to a program development manager who has skills and passion for data analysis. The Economic Assistance (EA) Division was identified as a key place to start implementing the RPM system, because it had the most extensive job class and classification within Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD). The EA Division also had existing quantitative data that would facilitate smooth RPM implementation. The manager in the division led a reporting unit consisting of three administrative aides to gather data and retrieve ancillary systems reports. It is also critical to improve succession planning, as the RPM is an evolving and ongoing development that may change hands over time.

Establishing the standards for the RPM evaluations of eligibility specialists (ES) within the Sonoma EA Division required employee buy-in. According to Pynes, employees should play a critical role in the performance evaluation process (2013, p. 320). The RPM implementation consisted of bi-weekly meetings that included program section managers, two supervisors, two leads, one line worker, and one union representative. Together, the team strategized and determined which standards would most accurately depict ES performance, settling on the following items:

- Task Productivity
- Task Timeliness
- Call Handling Productivity

- Call Handling Accuracy
- Eligibility Accuracy
- Procedural Accuracy

Based on the above competencies, RPM measures the average performance of the cohort, defined as all ES performing the same job function. If an individual's performance falls within 80%–120% of that average, the employee is meeting the required standards. The cohort average will shift over time, but this method promotes fairness because the employee's performance rate is data-driven. If an individual's rate of performance is over 120%, the employee is exceeding standards. If their rate is below 80%, the employee is not meeting standards. The RPM implementation team thoroughly vets expectations for each performance standard for accuracy, and the percentages allow room for error. *Table 1* lists the expectations for each of the standards.

Key Components

“Agencies that use evaluations for training and development purposes must train supervisors on how to develop performance objectives and standards, motivate employees to achieve the agreed-upon objectives, and counsel employees whose performance is unsatisfactory (Pynes, 2013, p. 313).” To meet this requirement, managers and supervisors receive training regarding RPM implementation's necessary steps to be successful.

Step 1: Plan the Work—Planning occurs at the beginning of the evaluation period between the supervisor and the employee. Employees will have an opportunity to set specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-based (SMART) goals and should feel clear about the performance standards they are hoping to achieve.

Step 2: Monitor the Work—During conferences, the supervisor and employee will review the Performance Planner and Professional Development Plan forms each month. This review provides an opportunity to discuss accomplishments or gaps in performance and establish action steps for their next

TABLE 1
ES RPM Performance Standards

Meeting Standards						
Role	Task Productivity	Task Timeliness	Call Handling Productivity	Call Handling Accuracy	Eligibility Accuracy	Procedural Accuracy
Full Rotation	80%–120%	80%–120%	80%–120%	Under Development	Under Development	Under Development
RC	80%–120%	Under Development	N/A	Under Development	Under Development	Under Development
ICT	1.10–1.40	80%–120%	80%–120%	Under Development	Under Development	Under Development
RC Supplemental	.53-.69	80%–120%	80%–120%	Under Development	Under Development	Under Development
IHSS	Under Development	Under Development	N/A	N/A	Under Development	Under Development

Courtesy of Sonoma County RPM Desk Guide—Service Center—September 19, 2017

conference. The supervisor is responsible for updating the RPM Data Grid for their staff.

Step 3: Evaluate the Work—The supervisor is responsible for completing the performance evaluation after 12 months of working with the employee or when the employee's role changes. The assessment will consist of a compilation of their conference records, employee input regarding their accomplishments and future goals, their overall average for the performance standards from the RPM Data Grid, and job-specific competencies and Gold Standards for conduct.

An RPM data grid houses the performance data gathered on EA Division employees and provides management with the status of their division as a whole. Some key points that make RPM unique are that it drives performance, establishes a system of accountability, and improves employee retention, resulting in reduced recruitment expenses for the county. Moreover, RPM supports the recent rapid expansion of telework opportunities because of the COVID-19 public health emergency, because it allows data tracking mechanisms for employee performance evaluation to remain unchanged.

Implementation

Some challenges Sonoma County HSD observed with RPM include the development of standards for 70 employee classifications. It is critical to note the difference in cultures throughout the division, which may struggle to adapt to the moving cohort average format. Supervisor training ranked high among lessons learned for Sonoma County, because supervisors are the primary users of the system and must understand how to optimize RPM to drive performance. While the union has been supportive of RPM, there is some concern regarding employee consent.

Sonoma County's RPM system shows promise toward meeting the need for employee performance evaluations that are objective, job-related, and consistent with the organization's mission (Pynes, 2013, p. 333). RPM implementation is an ongoing effort that requires a significant amount of time and collaboration throughout the department to develop the standards applicable to each position. The logic model in *Table 2* outlines the process of RPM implementation.

TABLE 2
ES RPM Performance Standards

Inputs		Outputs		Outcomes—Impact		
		Activities	Participation	Short	Medium	Long
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Data champion (Program Manager) ▪ Three administrative aides ▪ Human Resources Manager ▪ Personnel Analysts ▪ Division Managers ▪ Supervisors ▪ Lead workers ▪ Line Staff ▪ Union Representative ▪ IT/Systems Support ▪ Equipment ▪ Facilities ▪ Time (Long-term project) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bi-Weekly meetings ▪ RPM Action Log ▪ Sub-committees to establish standards and procedures ▪ Development and maintenance of RPM Data Grid ▪ Development of Performance Planner, Professional Development Plan, & Evaluation Forms ▪ Development of RPM User Guide ▪ Gather performance reports ▪ Pilot Group ▪ Update HR webpage to include RPM guides & forms ▪ Training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Data champion (Program Manager) ▪ Three administrative aides ▪ Human Resources Director ▪ Personnel Analysts ▪ Division Managers ▪ Supervisors ▪ Lead workers ▪ Line Staff ▪ Union Representative ▪ IT/Systems Support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implement RPM with a division that currently has ample data/tracking systems available. ▪ Create buy-in through training, staff, and union participation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staff will feel more support from management with RPM because expectations are clear, and professional development goals are frequently discussed. ▪ Supervisors will be able to provide more objective evaluations and high-frequency feedback to improve performance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ RPM is implemented throughout the entire department. ▪ Improved morale as evaluations are data-driven, and staff is recognized for their achievements. ▪ Improved retention and reduced recruitment costs as staff develop their professional goals and have growth opportunities within the department. 	

Assumptions	External Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cultural changes are necessary to shift towards data-driven evaluations. ▪ Supervisor training is essential to create buy-in. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The public health emergency has forced much of the staff to work from home. ▪ CalSAWS will have an impact on task management systems, which will interfere if this project were to begin beforehand.

Conclusion

Sonoma County's Results-Based Performance Management evaluation system establishes consistency in performance evaluations throughout the department and sets the tone of a work environment that centers on helping employees succeed. RPM clearly identifies the staff's rate of performance and areas for improvement. As exciting as this innovative endeavor is for neighboring counties hoping to adopt RPM, Contra Costa County is transitioning to CalSAWS in 2022, which will change our current task management system and may affect performance measures. It may be beneficial to postpone implementation of RPM in Contra Costa until after CalSAWS's inception or adapt RPM to match the CalSAWS Task Management System.

Acknowledgements

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References

- Michael Schrage, David Kiron, Bryan Hancock, and Raffaele Brechi. 2019. *MIT Sloan Management Review*. "The future of performance management is more data-driven, more flexible, more continuous, and more development-oriented." Retrieved on 7/20/20 from <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/projects/performance-managements-digital-shift/>.
- Pynes, Joan E., 2013. *Human Resources Management for Public and Non-Profit Organizations* (Fourth Edition). Jossey-Bass.