

THE WORKING TEST: TRAITS & GUESSES, OR TASKS & STANDARDS?

(Adapted from the paper presented by Samuel M. Sperling)

My paper describes the probationary rating procedure now used in the Los Angeles City Service. It also describes a second approach to probation--one which has been proposed to, but not yet adopted by City Management.

OVERHEAD #1: FORM PDAS-28

Let me begin by describing the probationary rating process now used throughout City Service in Los Angeles. This rating form, or some variation of it, is currently used in nearly all the 40- some City departments. As you can see, it's essentially a list of personal traits, work habits, and characteristics which managers think employees should apply to their work.

Form PDAS-28 was approved by the City's Civil Service Commission in 1959, and is now used for nearly all probationary ratings involving civilian (non-sworn) employees. Auto Mechanics & Accountants, Building Inspectors & Bus Drivers, Sr. Clerk Typists & Systems Engineers--all are rated on that form. While this one-size-fits-all approach may simplify test administration, it does not satisfy legal--or common sense--requirements related to the Working Test.

Moreover, since the rating factors listed on Form PDAS-28 are undefined, City raters are required to supply their own definitions. It's entirely possible, therefore, that ratings are sometimes contaminated by personal whims, idiosyncrasies, and biases. And with an estimated 5,000 supervisors and managers responsible for probationary ratings, the City of Los Angeles is probably generating a whole lot of contamination!

Rating procedures based on Form PDAS-28 permit two very different kinds of selection error: arbitrary removal and unwarranted retention. They allow probationers to be removed for reasons which are not clearly job-related; they also allow employees to be retained without requiring them to demonstrate their fitness for the job. Evidence of selection error would appear to be revealed in three recent analyses of City statistics.

OVERHEAD #2: THREE STATISTICAL STUDIES

The first of those analyses involved 16 City departments in which 180 probationary employees were removed between 1989/90 and 1993/94. Nine of those employees were not identified by ethnic code; of those who were so identified, 84 (49.1%) were African American. Almost no supervisory/managerial probationers were removed.

A second analysis compared probationary terminations with new hires during the years 1993/94 and 1997/98. During that 5-year period, 20 City departments terminated 193 probationers, 185 of whom were identified by ethnic code. Of that number, 59 (31.9%) were African Americans. Moreover, the 20 departments which made 193 probationary terminations also made 10,477 new hires. Of the new hires who were identified by ethnic

code, 19.7% were African Americans.

A third analysis, covering a 10-year period, studied statistics from an independent source. It reported that African Americans received 40.2% of the probationary terminations and 22.2% of the new hires. It also reported that of the 108,500 full-time employees hired between 1989-1998, only 598 were terminated. That's a termination rate of less than six-tenths of one percent, and it suggests that the working test is used too timidly in removing unqualified probationers. This study also indicated that probationers are more likely to be removed for misconduct than for unsatisfactory job performance.

While these three studies may not prove conclusively that City procedures violated Federal guideline, they do suggest that those procedures should be scrutinized very carefully. To date, the City has been cool to that suggestion.

I'd like now to describe a rating system which is fundamentally different from the one currently used throughout the City. It's a Tasks & Standards system, and it could be used for both probationary ratings and annual performance appraisals. It was developed over a ten-year period by the City's Personnel Department and the Advisory Affirmative Action Committee.

OVERHEAD #3: THE SUPERVISOR'S GUIDE TO P.A

The rating system I refer to is detailed in a 1992 Personnel Department publication, **The Supervisor's Guide to Performance Appraisal**. It had been approved by the Board of Civil Service Commissioners, Mayor Bradley, and the City Council. Finally, in 1993, it was sent to the Department Heads for their consideration.

To implement the rating system proposed in the **Guide**, Department Heads were urged to follow a logical, step-by-step process: 1) list the tasks in each job; 2) set performance standards for all major tasks; 3) identify critical work habits and establish standards for them; 4) design a rating format; and 5) adopt a rating procedure.

Listing the components of each job in the organization is a necessary first step in any plan to replace Traits & Guesses with Tasks & Standards. That step could be initiated simply by asking each incumbent employee to describe what he/she does on a daily basis.

When task lists have been prioritized, Department Heads would establish task-specific performance standards for each job in the department. Standards would normally relate to three dimensions of task performance: Quantity, Quality, and Manner of Performance.

The third step in implementing the new rating system would be to list the work habits which impact employees' overall job performance, and to establish standards for those habits. Critical work habits listed in the **Guide** include Attendance, Use of Time, and Teamwork. Standards for such work habits could appropriately be established for City-wide application.

OVERHEADS # 4 & 5: PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL REPORT

The next step in installing the proposed rating system would be to design a rating format which, while job-specific, could be used for every job in the department. The format depicted in overheads 4 & 5 was eventually sent to the Department Heads.

Finally, the **Guide** advised Department Heads to adopt a rating procedure for their new, Tasks & Standards system, and to ensure that --- when evaluating the performance of probationary employees---their supervisors used that procedure as a valid working test.

Implementing the proposed rating system would have completed a 20-year effort to validate Employee Selection in City Service. But a funny thing happened to Los Angeles before the new rating system could be validated: a new Mayor was installed as Chief Executive. Unfortunately, he didn't understand the City's Merit system. He questioned the need for all those civil service examinations, and wondered why employment tests must be both valid and fair.

A man in a hurry, the new Mayor was likened to a comic character who looked at an egg and expected it to crow. He seemed to feel that, while progress may have been good in the past, it had gone too far. His way of improving civil service was to free department heads from inefficient procedural safeguards. "Thus, the city's 20-year effort to ensure both validity and fairness in employee selection was unceremoniously abandoned.

Given the new Mayor's views on civil service, it's not surprising that, instead of being field-tested, the proposed rating system was buried. Instead of being made job-related, probationary ratings were continued in use which were clearly invalid and probably unfair as well. Finally, instead of being required to manage employee performance more effectively, department heads were made less accountable for mismanaging employee performance.

But Tasks & Standards is an idea whose time has come. A German philosopher put it this way: "Truth is established in three phases. First it's ignored or ridiculed. Then it's opposed, often with violence. Finally, it's proclaimed as self-evident."

Well, the truth about probation has been ignored/ridiculed for a long time. In Los Angeles, it's been opposed by City Management for the past seven years. But the need for, and value of, a performance-based working test is becoming increasingly apparent. Eventually, even those "liberated" department heads at City Hall will have to place public interest ahead of private privilege. They'll support Tasks & Standards because it's now self-evident that everyone in Los Angeles---themselves included---benefits when the management of employee performance is significantly improved!

ADJUSTABLE HURDLES* FOR EMPLOYEES

*Hurdles - (hur'diz) n. 1. Artificial barriers over which men or horses must leap in a race.

RATE EACH FACTOR	COMPETENT IMPROVEMENT NEEDED UNSATISFACTORY			
MARK EACH ITEM + Strong √Standard - Weak				
1. QUANTITY				
<input type="checkbox"/>	Amount of work performed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Completion of work on schedule			
2. QUALITY				
<input type="checkbox"/>	Accuracy			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Neatness of work product	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Thoroughness			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Oral Expression			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Written Expression			
3. WORK HABITS				
<input type="checkbox"/>	Observance of working hours	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Attendance			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Observance of rules including safety			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Economy of time and material			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Compliance with work instructions			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Orderliness in work			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Application to duties			
4. PERSONAL RELATIONS				
<input type="checkbox"/>	Getting along with fellow employees	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Meeting and handling the public			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Personal appearance			
5. ADAPTABILITY				
<input type="checkbox"/>	Performance in new situations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Performance in emergencies			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Performance with minimum instructions			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Initiative			

THREE STATISTICAL STUDIES

Probationary Removal

Total	African Americans
171	84
100%	49.1%

89/90-93/94, 16 departments, 5 years.

Terminations

Total	African American	Total	African American
185	59	10,477	2039
100%	31.9%	100%	19.5%

93/94-97/98, 20 departments, 5 years.

Terminations

Total	African American	Total	African American
525	211	108,500	23,700
100%	40.2%	100%	22.0%

1989-98, Agency-wide, 10 years.

supervisor's

guide to performance appraisal

1992 Edition

Performance Appraisal Report

Probationary Rating

Annual Evaluation

Employee's Name

Class Code

Fund No.

Rating Period Ending

Social Security No.

Department

Subdivision

TASKS AND STANDARDS

	Above Standard	Below Standard
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Task #1: Distributing the Bureau's Incoming Mail

- | | | | | |
|-----------|--|-------|-------|-------|
| | * Mail will be placed on addressee's desk . | | | |
| standards | * Mail will be distributed within 1/2 hour of delivery . | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| | * Mail will be distributed in a courteous, business-like manner. | | | |

Task #2: Typing Reports for Board Meeting

- | | | | | |
|-----------|---|-------|-------|-------|
| | * Typing will meet/exceed the 98% accuracy level. | | | |
| Standards | * Reports will be completed by established deadlines. | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| | * Format will comply with <u>Public Works Office Manual</u> . | | | |

Task #3: Receiving Incoming Telephone Calls

- | | | | | |
|-----------|--|-------|-------|-------|
| | * Calls will be answered within three rings. | | | |
| Standards | * Calls will be answered in a courteous, business-like manner. | _____ | _____ | _____ |

Task #4: Maintaining the Bureau's Personnel Files

- | | | | | |
|-----------|--|-------|-------|-------|
| | * Folders will be checked in and out according to current Bureau procedures. | | | |
| Standards | * Communication related to employee folders will be and business-like. | _____ | _____ | _____ |

Task #5: Greeting Visitors at the Public Counter

- | | | | | |
|-----------|--|-------|-------|-------|
| | * Visitors will be greeted within one minute of their appearance. | | | |
| standards | * Visitors' concerns will be addressed in a courteous, business-like manner. | _____ | _____ | _____ |

Performance Appraisal Report (Continued)

HABITS AND STANDARDS	Above Standard	Standard	Below Standard
ATTENDANCE: * Reports for work regularly * Reports for work on time * Gives notice when absence is unavoidable	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
USE OF TIME: * Makes Maximum use of time on the job	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
TEAMWORK: * Maintains cooperative relations with co-workers at all levels	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
OVER-ALL EVALUATION	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Goals and Objectives for Next Rating Period:

Rater's Comments:

Rater's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Employee's Comments About the Rating:

Employee's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Reviewer's Initials: _____

Date: _____

Note: A complete training program workbook is available free of charge from:

Academy For Supervisory Development

P.O. Box 1668

Monterey park, CA 91754

(626) 571-1440