

ICMA



MANAGER EVALUATIONS GUIDE

June 2025

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ABOUT ICMA

ICMA, the International City/County Management Association, advances professional local government through leadership, management, innovation, and ethics. ICMA provides member support; publications; data and information; peer and results-oriented assistance; and training and professional development to more than 13,000 city, town, and county experts and other individuals and organizations throughout the world. The management decisions made by ICMA's members affect millions of individuals living in thousands of communities, from small villages and towns to large metropolitan areas.

Manager Evaluations Guide

June 2025

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Item number: e-44260

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CONTENTS

TASK FORCE ON MANAGER EVALUATIONS	2
-----------------------------------	---

PREFACE	3
Definition of Terms	

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
---------------------	---

2 THE PURPOSE OF MANAGER EVALUATIONS	7
--------------------------------------	---

3 THE MANAGER EVALUATION PROCESS	8
Initiating the Process	
Developing an Evaluation Form	
Deciding Whether to Use a Consultant	
Using the Evaluation Form	
Public versus Private Evaluations	
Evaluation Results	

4 RELATIONSHIP OF EVALUATION TO COMPENSATION	16
--	----

5 WHAT OTHERS ARE DOING	18
Self-Evaluations	
Periodic Check-ins—No Surprises	
360-Degree Assessments	
Facilitated Performance Evaluation	
Additional Considerations	
Data-gathering/Software Resources	

6 CONCLUSION	22
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7 RESOURCES	23
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TASK FORCE ON MANAGER EVALUATIONS

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PREFACE

Regular performance evaluations are a cornerstone of an organization’s management systems. Evaluating the manager is as important as evaluating other employees, but the process has unique challenges. The 2012-2013 Executive Board of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), led by then President Jim Malloy, acknowledged the need for local government managers and their elected bodies to have additional tools and resources to support their evaluation process and produced

a handbook to serve as a roadmap. In 2020-2021 a new Task Force on Manager Evaluations reviewed and updated the earlier handbook and produced the current guide. Refreshed with a new section and complete review in 2025.

Managers are encouraged to review this guide and work with their elected bodies to develop formal, mutually agreed-upon processes for their own evaluations. This guide is also intended to highlight the value of a formal manager evaluation process and to assist local elected officials in the design of an effective evaluation tool.

Definition of Terms

- The term *local government*, as used in this publication, refers to a town, village, borough, township, city, county, or legally constituted association of governments.
- The term *manager* refers to the local government’s chief executive officer (CEO) or chief administrative officer (CAO) who has been appointed by the government’s elected body to oversee day-to-day operations.
- The terms *elected officials*, *elected body*, *governing body*, and *board* refer to any council, commission, or other locally elected body, including assemblies, boards of trustees, boards of selectmen, boards of supervisors, boards of directors, and so on.
- The term *manager evaluation* refers to the appraisal or assessment conducted by the elected body of the manager’s performance in achieving organizational goals and implementing policy.

SECTION 1

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The periodic evaluation of the local government manager by the elected body is an important component of a high-performance organization. The most important aspect of an evaluation is the conversation between the governing body and the manager. Without a structured evaluation, problems can arise, grow, and end up creating major issues for the manager, the governing body, and the organization. Conversely, without positive feedback offered in a meaningful way, a manager may not feel fully appreciated, particularly when he or she is leading the organization through difficult times. Lack of appreciation is a major reason that people begin looking for new jobs.

There are many ways to conduct an evaluation. In most cases, the manager begins by preparing a report of accomplishments/goals (a form of a self-assessment) that goes to the governing body. Then the evaluation is conducted in one of these typical ways:

1. The governing body members fill out an evaluation form; someone consolidates the responses; and the responses are discussed with the manager. The manager's report is part of this discussion.
2. The governing body chair convenes a closed session without an evaluation form and asks his or her colleagues for their informal comments on the manager. Then they meet with the manager and discuss those comments, along with the manager's report.
3. A third-party facilitator conducts interviews with each governing body member, prepares a confidential report, and facilitates a discussion in a closed session with the manager.

Sometimes a 360-degree component is utilized, as described later. When used, it should be done with care and thought.

The desired outcome of a performance evaluation should be mutual understanding by

all parties (all members of the governing body and the manager) on each person's perspectives, consensus direction on goals, what the manager needs from the governing body to be successful, and any action steps coming out of the evaluation.

To be a meaningful evaluation, the conversation needs to go two ways: from the governing body to the manager, and from the manager to the governing body.

It is a relationship, and for the manager to be successful in his or her role, the relationship should be strengthened through the evaluation process. That means discussing the hard topics as well as the easy ones, such as how well the manager is doing. Addressing the things that are not going particularly well is critical for the manager to be successful.

The evaluation has two components:

- One component includes performance goals and objectives. These are linked to the elected body's strategic plans, goals, and priorities, but they often include internal organizational goals that the manager is focusing on (for example, filling critical department head positions). The evaluation should address the manager's degree of progress toward these goals and objectives, which should be identified in advance so expectations are clear.
- A second, and essential, component is the manager's leadership and management. The "how" is as important as the "what" (goals). How a manager works can get him or her in trouble even when he or she is achieving goals. An evaluation should include questions relevant to the top executive role, customized to the particular situation.

It is important that all members of the elected body participate in the process. While the manager takes direction from the body, he or she

works for all of them and needs to understand each elected official's opinions and interests. Individual perspectives as well as collective views are important.

The manager should convey to the governing body why it is important for everyone to provide feedback. When the process includes use of an evaluation instrument, a deadline should be set for its completion, and someone should follow up to ensure that this is done. When a third-party facilitator is used to conduct interviews, a narrow timeline should be established to get the instruments completed and the report written.

There is no one correct way to conduct a manager evaluation. The key is to ensure that

the evaluation takes place in a regular, mutually agreed-upon manner and is viewed by all as an opportunity for communication between the elected officials and the manager.

It may be useful to use a consultant to help the elected body prepare for and conduct the manager's evaluation. A neutral third-party facilitator can ensure that the feedback is gathered in a comprehensive way, without bias. The facilitator will typically lead the discussion in the closed session with the manager as well, and then write up the results following the session.

SECTION 2

THE PURPOSE OF MANAGER EVALUATIONS

High-performance local governments embrace continual improvement. Conducting regular appraisals of the manager's work performance is part of the continual improvement process.

The purpose of the evaluation is to help the manager be successful in his or her role. Being the chief executive is not an easy job. The manager takes direction from the governing body and works for all members of the governing board.

The evaluation process, if done correctly, should increase communication between the members of the elected body and the manager concerning the manager's performance, leadership, and management. It should result in shared understanding by the governing body and the manager about expectations, interests, and goals for the coming year. It should also result in the governing body understanding what the manager needs from them to be successful.

The evaluation provides an opportunity for the elected body to have an honest dialogue with the manager about its expectations, to assess what is being accomplished, to recognize the manager's achievements and contributions, to identify any performance gaps, to develop standards to measure future performance, and to identify the resources and actions necessary to achieve the agreed-upon goals.

Keeping the focus on "big picture" strategic goals and behaviors rather than on minor issues or one-time mistakes/complaints leads to better outcomes.

Given that good relationships promote candor and constructive planning, the performance appraisal also provides a forum for both parties to discuss and strengthen the relationship between the elected body and the manager, ensuring better alignment of goals while reducing misunderstandings and surprises. When elected bodies conduct regular performance appraisals of the manager, they are more likely to achieve their community's goals and objectives.

There is no one way to conduct a performance evaluation, and different communities conduct evaluations of the manager differently. Section 3 discusses a basic approach to evaluation, and the section starting on page 18 describes such common approaches and tools as self-evaluations, periodic check-ins, 360-degree assessments, and facilitated evaluations to enhance and strengthen the evaluation process for a strong, outcome-based partnership.

SECTION 3

THE MANAGER EVALUATION PROCESS

Ideally, the performance appraisal process for a manager is the natural continuation of the hiring process, and a plan for evaluation should be established at the start.

INITIATING THE PROCESS

Prior to recruiting candidates, the elected body typically develops key goals and objectives for the manager position. During the selection process, the candidate(s) and the hiring body discuss these goals and objectives along with the long- and short-term needs and issues of the community. These conversations lay the groundwork for the manager's performance evaluation. At this point, the performance appraisal process should also be formalized.

A manager's employment agreement should stipulate that the performance evaluation will be formalized as a written document and that all parties will meet to discuss the contents in person. The agreement should also identify the frequency with which evaluations will take place (e.g., annually, semi-annually). By including this information in the employment agreement, the hiring body ensures that communications between the manager and the elected body will be consistently scheduled and that initiatives and objectives can be reviewed and updated on a regular basis.

Frequency and Timing. In considering the timing of evaluations, it is recommended that the first formal evaluation take place after the manager and elected body have worked together for a year.

Sometimes, a new manager prefers that the first evaluation take place at the six-month point. This can be helpful as a check-in to ensure that the new manager is on track, that any early issues arising can be addressed quickly, and that if the manager needs something from the governing body, he or she can bring that up for discussion.

It is further recommended that the evaluation be scheduled during the least busy time of the year for the manager and the elected officials, avoiding both the budget preparation season (particularly if the manager's compensation is tied to the evaluation) and the election season (lest the evaluation become an election issue). The scheduling should also allow adequate time for newly elected members of the board to become familiar with the manager's performance.

If performance evaluations were not discussed at the time of hiring, either the manager or a member of the elected body may request that an evaluation process be instituted, and the specifics for conducting the evaluation can then be agreed upon outside of the provisions of the employment agreement.

If the request is made by a member of the elected body, it is important to emphasize that the purpose of the evaluation is to serve as a tool for mutual success of the manager, organization, and governing body, not as a means of punishing the manager or setting the stage for termination. While elected officials, especially those who are newly elected, may sometimes wish for a change in management, the performance evaluation should not be used to effect such a change.

Setting Expectations. It is helpful for the elected body to come to consensus on the initial expectations of the newly hired manager so that priorities can be assigned and progress measured. Issues that were important when the manager was hired will logically factor into the initial evaluation. Then, in the succeeding years, the expectations are typically updated to reflect the latest accomplishments and newest challenges. Of course, priorities may shift during the year. If that happens, the manager and governing body should mutually adjust the priorities to reflect the new realities and incorporate those in the evaluation process.

One priority that should not shift over time is the expectation that the professional manager will abide by and promote the **ICMA Code of Ethics**. The manager's commitment to the tenets in the Code should have been clarified and understood by all parties during the hiring process.

If, with the passage of time, elections have taken place and the board that is conducting the evaluation is not the same board that hired the manager, it is important that the newly elected officials quickly be introduced to the established performance goals, measures, and evaluation process. This can be done as part of the orientation for new board members, included in a discussion of the form of government and the role of the manager. If any new members lack experience conducting performance evaluations, they will need training before participating in the process. The manager can provide an overview during orientation, and then provide the specific training in advance of the evaluation process.

A few issues should be considered when preparing for the evaluation, including how to develop an evaluation form (if one is used), whether to use an outside consultant, how to use an evaluation form, and whether the evaluation should be conducted in private or in public.

DEVELOPING AN EVALUATION FORM

Unlike most employee performance evaluations, in which the employee is evaluated by a single executive or supervisor, the manager's evaluation is conducted by a group of individuals acting as a body. As each elected official likely has different expectations, the board members must first come to a consensus on the measures and definitions to be used.

To be most useful, the evaluation form should be outcome-based, using criteria that have been developed collaboratively with the manager. The form would incorporate the elected body's agreed-upon priorities—ideally through a strategic planning process—as well as leadership and management criteria. The performance criteria on the evaluation form should be ones on which the elected body can offer meaningful

feedback because they can observe the manager's performance in those areas.

DECIDING WHETHER TO USE A CONSULTANT

Using an outside facilitator for the evaluation can help ensure that each member of the elected body has equal input and that the feedback is fairly represented. Most typically this involves an interview with each member of the elected body by the facilitator, who asks a set of questions and prepares a confidential report.

A third party can also ensure that areas of agreement among the elected officials regarding the manager are highlighted, along with those areas of disagreement and issues that will warrant the most discussion during the session with the manager.

Before the governing body attempts to “speak with one voice,” it is important to have a session with the manager. This is because the answers given by a single governing body member prior to the conversation in the closed session might be enlightened through discussion. Therefore, if the governing body tries to consolidate its views without benefit of insights and reflections from the manager, it is limiting its perspective too early in the process. Use of an independent consultant is especially helpful if there is a lack of cohesion among elected officials.

A consultant can be used in a variety of ways:

- At a minimal level, a consultant could be used to simply prepare an evaluation process and an evaluation form, consolidate the responses from the elected officials, and prepare a report. The consultant could then provide guidance to the board chair on how to conduct the evaluation session with the manager.
- At a more comprehensive level, a consultant can conduct individual interviews with each member of the governing body (with structured questions but not a form), prepare a confidential report, and facilitate the closed session with the governing body

continues on page 12

Tips for the Closed Session Discussion

These tips are intended for governing body members conducting an evaluation. Throughout the session, it is important for governing body members to encourage the manager to actively participate. Success is a collaboration, and the communication needs to go two ways to result in mutual understanding. Seek the manager's feedback as the conversation flows. Avoid coming to conclusions or judgments without giving the manager an opportunity to provide his or her perspective.

Useful performance evaluations will:

- Recognize the accomplishments of the manager and show appreciation for his or her unique contributions to the organization.
- Clearly identify areas where the manager is doing well.
- Clearly identify areas where the manager can improve performance.
- Specify definite actions that will allow the manager to make additional value-added contributions to the organization in the future.
- Obtain the manager's own assessments of progress and his or her individual contribution to collective actions and achievements.

Discussing tasks that the manager performs well:

- Gives the manager an understanding of what he or she is appreciated for, including some things that may not be apparent to the manager.
- Gives the manager recognition and appreciation for achievements, not only of the manager but of the organization.
- Creates a positive climate for the remainder of the evaluation.

Reminders for the positive feedback portion of the discussion:

- Listen intently.

- Reinforce what is positive about the manager's performance and should continue.
- Provide concrete examples and specific descriptions of actions, work, and results.
- Give only positive feedback during this part of the evaluation.
- Acknowledge improvements that the manager has made.
- Praise efforts if the manager has worked hard on something but failed because of circumstances beyond his or her control.

Discussing areas that need improvement

- Gives insight into behaviors that might be blind spots for the manager but that are of concern to governing body members.
- Offers an opportunity to hear how the manager feels about change and improvement for growth.
- Allows governing body members to express any concerns about the manager's overall performance and performance in specific areas.
- Encourages the manager to higher levels of achievement.

Reminders for governing body members:

- Keep the discussion focused on performance.
- Describe actions and results that do not meet expectations.

- Describe areas where the manager can make a greater contribution. Describe any observed situation or performance that needs to be changed; be specific.
- Tell the manager what needs to be done if a specific change of behavior needs to take place.
- Focus on learning from the past and planning for the future.
- Keep this part of the discussion as positive and encouraging as possible.

Do's and Don'ts

(These pertain to when the governing body chair leads the discussion and there is no facilitator involved. When a neutral third party is facilitating, the process will be different.)

Do's for the Governing Body Chair

- At the start, spend a few minutes warming up and laying out the agenda so everyone is reminded about what to expect. Give an overview.
- Explain that the manager will participate in the session. Hearing from the manager as part of the conversation is essential.
- Always start with the positives. Be specific.
- Explain the evaluation feedback in all areas: Talk about the differences and similarities in how governing body members evaluated the manager, and how consensus was achieved (when it is). The manager should be in the room when the feedback is discussed so he or she understands the reasoning. Without that grounding, misunderstandings can arise, even if "direction" appears clear.
- Be honest. Tell it like it is.
- Be a coach, not a judge. As in athletics, effective coaching involves a lot more than just scorekeeping. Simply providing

the score at the end of the game doesn't improve performance.

- Ask the manager for his or her feedback regarding what was shared, making clear that you are interested in his or her feelings and thoughts.
- When appropriate, in concert with the manager, develop an improvement plan that includes areas of deficiency and developmental needs.

Don'ts for all members of the governing body:

- Don't evaluate the manager on any given dimension without the facts. Feedback should be based on actual results or examples. A "cannot answer" is better than a rating that is not supported by any examples or facts.
- Don't be too general. Support your answer with examples.
- Don't sidestep problems. Describe what you observe as performance problems and clearly identify what needs improvement.
- Don't be vague or generalize the reasons for your performance feedback. Provide clear and specific examples of desired results and expectations. Also understand that what you as an individual elected official expect by way of results may not be what your colleagues expect, and the manager takes direction from the governing body as a whole.
- Don't ambush the manager by identifying deficiencies or problems that have never been addressed in informal discussions prior to the formal evaluation.
- Don't minimize the manager's concerns or discount his or her feelings. Ask the manager's perspectives. A manager does not work in a vacuum. Seek to understand his or her views.

and manager. Following the session, the consultant can prepare a memorandum documenting the resulting agreements of the elected officials and the manager.

When using an evaluation form, a consultant should solicit each elected official's full participation by asking for examples and details for each category of performance on which the manager is being evaluated. It is important to ensure that all voices are heard and that specific feedback can be provided.

Once the consultant has collected the completed evaluation forms, he or she should meet with the manager to review the results of the feedback, so that the manager can be prepared for the in-person closed session with the entire governing body. Because the premise is that the evaluation is geared toward helping the manager be successful in his or her role, it is important that feedback not be viewed as a "gotcha" and that the manager can reflect on it prior to the conversation with the governing board.

If desired, the consultant can also review the consolidated feedback with the chair or mayor of the elected body to review the consolidated feedback.

If the elected body decides to use a consultant, they can get referrals from several sources, including the [ICMA Senior Advisors](#), other managers in the region, the state league, the Society for Human Resource Management ([SHRM](#)), or the local government's regular employment consulting firms. If an executive recruiter was used to assist in hiring the manager, the recruiter may have the appropriate skills and background to set up the initial evaluation process.

It is recommended that the evaluation process NOT be facilitated by the local government's corporation counsel, municipal clerk, or human resources director because these individuals are not independent parties. In almost all cases, their positions have either a reporting or a cooperating relationship with the manager, so involving them in the manager's evaluation may damage relationships that are necessary for the effective and efficient operation of the local government.

If a consultant is not used to facilitate the development of an evaluation form, the manager can obtain examples of other forms, as well as review the one used for department heads in his or her jurisdiction and modify so it is meaningful for the chief executive role. It is important to understand that a manager is evaluated on performance that differs from that of most other employees. Because of this key difference, flexibility is needed to add any necessary components intended to assess varied goals and objectives and to facilitate a dialogue between the elected body and the manager.

USING THE EVALUATION FORM

The usefulness of any performance evaluation depends almost entirely on the understanding, impartiality, and objectivity with which feedback is offered. In order to obtain a useful evaluation, an evaluator should differentiate between personality and performance. This is challenging in the case of the chief executive, where intangibles are of great importance to governing body members. But elected officials can be advised to focus on performance and how the manager's work and approach contribute to the success of the local government.

Limit the Number of Criteria. The evaluation form should not have too many criteria for providing feedback. Having a form with too many questions or criteria can result in "survey fatigue," answers that are too short or meaningless, or non-responses.

Ideally, no more than 10 questions or criteria should be used on an evaluation form, with descriptive ratings, not points. Then a series of open-ended questions should be used.

Use Descriptive Ratings, Not Points. Numerical ratings are very difficult to norm. Some evaluators are "hard graders" and will never give anyone the highest possible rating. Others will just check boxes without giving any thought to what the numbers mean.

Keeping the purpose of the evaluation in mind, it is more beneficial to ask for the elected officials to offer their evaluative and descriptive feedback.

Performance Evaluation Outline

The following outline provides an overview to use for the in-person portion of the manager's evaluation when the governing body chair is leading the discussion.

Agenda

1. Opening remarks from the board chair (see suggested language below)
2. Overview of feedback (either from the board chair or consultant if used)
3. Reflection and overview from the manager
4. Summary comments from each member of the elected body (comments should focus on what each one values in the manager and what would be beneficial to change; 3 minutes for each person)
 - Questions or comments from the manager
 - Final reflections from the manager (the opportunity for the manager to summarize)
 - Summary comments from the board chair
 - Any actions to be taken (development or expected results): Keep doing, stop doing, start doing

Opening Remarks from the Board Chair

State intentions up front. Setting the stage is one of the most critical things you can do. Here is suggested language:

“It is important for the manager to hear from us. When it comes to expectations and goals, we will be speaking as a body. We also have individual perspectives, and our manager needs to hear those as well. Our challenge, personally, is to let

go when we know how we feel is not the sense of the group, and at the same time acknowledge that our colleagues do not all share the same opinion. Our aim is to help the manager be successful in [his/her] role. As a result of this evaluation, we want the manager to feel motivated, energized, challenged, and appreciated and have clarity of action and next steps. And that [he/she] has been part of the conversation. It will be a two-way conversation.

“The annual review looks back on the past year as a whole. We deal with so many issues over the course of the year that it's easy to fall back on the past few months. So let's remember to think about the year in its entirety.”

Review the agenda (above) and note that the facilitator will help with time and manage the flow of conversation (if a facilitator is being used)

Provide closure:

“At the end of the evaluation I will provide remarks that summarize both the spirit of the body and our appreciation for our staff, the tone of the conversation and the actions we hope our manager will take from the conversation.”

[If a facilitator is used, this is often the role of that individual.]

Examples are:

- On Track, Outperforming, Needs Improvement, Cannot Evaluate.
- Include a “comment” line for each of the criteria, asking for examples to support the evaluation rating.

Have Open-ended Questions. Additionally, open-ended questions are quite important. Typically, these provide the most meaningful feedback for a manager. Examples are:

- What are the top three strengths of the manager?
- What opportunities for improvement do you suggest for the manager?
- Do you agree with the goals suggested by

the manager in his/her self-assessment/ accomplishments/goals report? What others would you suggest?

- What does the governing body do to support the manager’s success? What else could we do?
- What other comments do you have?

As noted earlier, it is recommended that the initial formal evaluation not take place until the elected officials and the manager have worked together for a year; however, short, less formal evaluations can be useful on a quarterly or semi-annual basis. After that, at least one formal evaluation (still with periodic informal evaluations) should be conducted per year, as longer intervals create a higher likelihood of miscommunication and surprises.

Competencies for Management and Leadership

The manager’s success in achieving the goals set by the elected body is related to his or her competencies and behaviors with respect to the specific functions identified as the responsibility of the manager. Defining the strengths of the manager and identifying areas for improvement are part of the evaluation.

ICMA has developed a list of 14 critical core competencies, the **Practices for Effective Local Government Management and Leadership**. The list was developed for the purpose of the **ICMA Voluntary Credentialing Program**, but the manager and elected body might find it helpful for identifying the specific observable behaviors to be used in the manager evaluation. It is suggested that the manager and elected body select what they believe to be the most important areas for achieving its goals and evaluate the manager’s performance in these areas.

These are the ICMA Practices (full descriptions [can be found at icma.org](https://www.icma.org)):

1. Personal and professional integrity
2. Community engagement
3. Equity and inclusion
4. Staff effectiveness
5. Personal resiliency and development
6. Strategic leadership
7. Strategic planning
8. Policy facilitation and implementation
9. Community and resident service
10. Service delivery
11. Technological literacy
12. Financial management and budgeting
13. Human resources management and workforce engagement
14. Communication and information sharing.

No feedback on any of the criteria in the evaluation should be a surprise. Ongoing conversations should be held throughout the year (assuming that the evaluation is done annually) to help the manager understand if he or she is on course or if any interim corrections are necessary. Ideally, the criteria in the evaluation will have already been touched on in earlier conversations, so the evaluation will serve as a written summary of them.

PUBLIC VERSUS PRIVATE EVALUATIONS

Unless required by state law, it is recommended that the performance evaluation conversation with the governing body and manager be conducted in a closed session. This will foster the most productive open dialogue and conversation. A public setting is likely to make this difficult or impossible. In states where evaluations cannot be conducted in closed sessions, care should be taken to ensure that the evaluation does no harm to the goal of supporting the manager's success in his or her role.

Many states have specific laws about whether and when the public may be excluded from attending a meeting involving the elected body or from having access to certain records involving a public employee.

Such "sunshine" laws were first created to increase public disclosure by governmental agencies. Their purpose is to promote accountability and transparency by allowing the public to see how decisions are made and how money is allocated.

While all states have such laws, the exact provisions vary. For example, specific legislation may require that all government meetings be open to the public or that written records be released upon request. In many states, all local government records are available for review by the public, including evaluation documents and notes, unless they are specifically exempted or their disclosure prohibited by state statutes.

If evaluation forms and reports are required to be made public, then that is an important

factor in whether such documents should even be prepared. ***The question should be whether having them in the public arena will advance the purpose of the evaluation—which is to help the manager be successful in his or her job and promote constructive conversation—or whether it will hinder that purpose.*** When such documents will become public, then it is advised that they not be created in the first place, and that the evaluation be verbal. It can still be structured, but with no written reports. Again, state law needs to dictate what is possible. Doing no harm needs to be an important consideration in how to proceed.

Regardless of whether the evaluation is conducted in a public or closed session, each state's statute will dictate certain procedures for meeting notification, recording of minutes, and disclosure of decisions. These procedures should be reviewed by the elected officials, the manager, and legal counsel and followed throughout the evaluation process.

No matter what procedures are dictated by state statute, all final decisions or actions related to the manager's performance pertaining to employment agreement changes and compensation should be made public. If state law does not require it, however, the performance evaluation reports should be retained as confidential personnel documents.

EVALUATION RESULTS

The evaluation serves as the written, formal record of the conversation between the manager and the elected body and consists of two important sections. The first section is the elected body's appraisal of the manager's performance with respect to the previously agreed-upon goals for the period under review as well as the general performance of the organization. The second section contains an agreed-upon list of the goals for the next appraisal period as well as any specific performance areas identified for improvement.

SECTION 4

RELATIONSHIP OF EVALUATION TO COMPENSATION

To summarize, the primary purposes of a manager's performance evaluation are

1. To support the success of the manager in his or her role by providing meaningful feedback, ensuring alignment of expectations, and identifying how the governing body can be helpful to the manager.
2. To provide a tool for communication between the elected body and the manager.
3. To provide an opportunity for the elected body to specifically indicate levels of satisfaction with the manager on mutually identified and defined performance priorities.
4. To provide an opportunity for the manager to learn and improve, and to share feedback with the governing body.

In addition, the evaluation can allow for fair and equitable compensation adjustments based on a review of performance in achieving mutually identified priorities and on the elected body's level of satisfaction with the manager's overall performance. However, performance evaluations that are tied directly to compensation decisions are often distorted by those decisions and therefore result in less-than-honest communication between the elected body and the manager. This happens primarily because

1. Elected officials wishing to offer upward compensation adjustments may feel obliged to embellish the evaluation in a positive manner to justify the compensation decision to the public.
2. Elected officials not wishing to adjust compensation may feel obligated to justify their decision with negative comments about

performance that actually are not a major concern to them.

3. The manager may be reluctant to seek full clarification on issues raised in the evaluation for fear it could result in a reconsideration of the compensation decision.

To avoid these distortions, a balanced evaluation is necessary: the evaluation should provide the opportunity for open communication and at the same time be used for compensation decisions related to identified achievements and corrective actions by the manager. To this end, a balanced evaluation would

1. Establish a clear set of performance expectations prior to the evaluation period.
2. Include an interim evaluation without any consideration of compensation to focus on clarity of communication and performance to date. This evaluation would allow the manager to address areas of performance that were of concern to the elected body.
3. Use a full-term evaluation to assess the level of satisfaction for the entire performance period and thus provide the basis for a fair and equitable compensation decision.

Often, factors other than the manager's performance enter compensation decisions, including

1. The economic climate of the community and region.
2. The status of compensation in the local private sector.
3. Compensation for other employees of the local government.

4. A general review of the competitive position of the local government in the local market area.
5. A comparative salary review.

In summary, the evaluation of a professional manager's performance can provide input into compensation decisions by the local elected body, but the value of an evaluation as a means of communication is best served by a periodic evaluation not directly tied to compensation.

SECTION 5

WHAT OTHERS ARE DOING

Performance evaluations can be enhanced in several ways—by using self-evaluations, periodic check-ins, 360-degree assessments, and/or a facilitated evaluation system.

SELF-EVALUATIONS

It is recommended that a self-evaluation be included in any manager's evaluation. The purpose of a self-evaluation is for the manager to reflect on his or her performance in achieving the organizational objectives, including both internal and external accomplishments and challenges in handling specific tasks and providing organizational direction and leadership.

In a public setting, process and perception can be as important as outcomes, and managers should include all three in a self-evaluation. Thus, a manager's self-evaluation should make clear to elected officials the process by which the manager pursued individual goals, and the perceptions of both the manager and stakeholders of the manager's success or failure in meeting those goals. A manager's self-evaluation should be customized to the needs of each governmental entity.

PERIODIC CHECK-INS—NO SURPRISES

As suggested earlier, there should be no surprises during an evaluation. Managers should be continually evaluating, assessing, measuring, and communicating with employees. Providing this type of continuous evaluation is a particular challenge, however, for elected boards because it requires the participation of all board members—the manager reports to a group and not to a single individual supervisor. But the manager is communicating regularly with all members of the elected body, and there are ample opportunities to hear and solicit feedback one-on-one from the elected officials.

If a process is in place for formal evaluations of the manager, such evaluations likely occur just once per year. The annual evaluation can be a stressful time for all involved, and it can also be a challenge to remember everything that has occurred over the past year. Moreover, it is easy for annual assessments to skew toward recent events, challenges, and successes while deemphasizing activities that occurred nine or ten months earlier. In reality, an elected body's perception of a manager's job performance is often viewed through lenses crafted by the "crisis of the day" or by how smoothly the last board meeting went.

Periodic check-ins on goals, such as once per quarter, can help reduce the stress and minimize the surprises that can come when a manager's performance is evaluated only annually. A periodic review of a manager's work plan can help remind the elected body of the manager's long-term goals (as set by the organization) so that both parties can evaluate the manager's progress toward achieving those goals. If progress on the work plan has slowed down, or if other challenges have arisen along the way, a quarterly check-in offers the manager an opportunity to self-reflect on his or her performance as well as a forum to explain delays. It can also provide the manager the opportunity to remind the board of the 14 core areas described in the [ICMA Practices for Effective Local Government Management and Leadership](#) that are critical and are part of operating effectively on a day-to-day basis.

A periodic check-in on the manager's work plan is also important when the members of the elected board change, such as after an election, resignation, or committee reassignments. By apprising the new board members of the manager's work plan, the manager is making certain that they understand and are supportive of the projects or goals that he or she is working on.

360-DEGREE ASSESSMENTS

Another form of appraisal is the 360-degree or multi-rater assessment. Generally speaking, the 360-degree assessment collects feedback from supervisors, subordinates, and peers. The manager completes a self-evaluation as well, and a sample of the workforce provides the feedback from subordinates. In some instances, feedback is also obtained from individuals outside the organization, such as residents who have frequently worked with the manager and/or who use the jurisdiction's services regularly.

Some jurisdictions include a 360-degree assessment as part of the manager's appraisal process. The [ICMA Voluntary Credentialing Program](#) requires credentialed managers to complete a multi-rater assessment as a professional development planning tool within five years of entering the program.

In most cases a 360-degree assessment is conducted online, and the individuals completing the assessment are the direct reports to the manager. Raters complete evaluation forms that are returned electronically to an independent third party in order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

One of the chief benefits of the 360-degree assessment is that it provides feedback on competencies that may be missing and therefore not addressed in the typical performance appraisal. For instance, staff will see behaviors that elected officials do not see and vice versa. Thus, a manager's performance may be improved because it is evaluated from several perspectives. However, if the 360-degree assessment is used as part of the appraisal process, it's important that the evaluation doesn't become a measure of the manager's popularity with staff or the public. The manager works for the elected officials and should be evaluated by them on the basis of their defined expectations.

FACILITATED PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

A facilitated evaluation presents opportunities for both the elected officials and the executive to

engage in a useful exercise. The elected officials have a way to candidly and thoroughly offer their individual feedback, with the governing body then reaching agreement as a whole on goals and expectations. This section is a slightly modified version of the article "A Better Way: The Facilitated CAO Performance Review" by Dan Keen and Jan Perkins in the August 2022 issue of *PM Magazine*.

Benefits for Governing Bodies. The facilitated evaluation process offers many benefits for elected officials.

- 1. It professionalizes the process.** Most elected officials aren't trained in performing employee evaluations. Even for those who do them at work, the process of evaluating an executive appointed by a governing body is very different, given the multiple elected officials in a public organization instead of just one supervisor in other settings. Councils also turn over regularly, so often there are members who haven't been through an evaluation process yet. The facilitated evaluation brings consistency and professionalism to the process.
- 2. It values all opinions.** Often in a council-led evaluation, one or two voices come to dominate the discussion. A facilitator can structure the process so that everyone's opinions are given equal weight and can be expressed in a thoughtful, reflective setting, rather than in a group discussion that can meander or become contentious.
- 3. It makes the process easier.** In a mayor- or council-led evaluation, elected officials not only have to consider and compose feedback, but they must also manage all aspects of the process. With a facilitator, one person is responsible for managing the evaluation from start to finish, and the board or governing body members can concentrate on formulating useful feedback for the manager.
- 4. It creates clarity.** Sometimes governing body members have never had a chance to consider the appointed officials' role in executing

their expectations. The facilitated evaluation allows members to share with each other how they perceive the manager's role and consider views other than their own. Often a much richer and more nuanced picture of the governing body's vision emerges when they have a chance to consider the manager's role and performance.

Benefits for the Manager. The facilitated performance evaluation also helps the manager.

- 1. It results in meaningful feedback.** Working for multiple governing body members means multiple opinions. This kind of evaluation includes the important step of analyzing and synthesizing the feedback so the manager gets a clear picture of how the governing body as a whole sees the manager's work.
- 2. It clears the air.** When the facilitator has a background in local government (which is helpful), he or she can point out little things gathered in the process that the manager can attend to. For instance, if a manager has not personalized his or her office with family photos or professional mementos, it might cause some governing body members to wonder whether the manager was committed to the job. The facilitator could alert the manager and help alleviate a potential point of ongoing doubt.
- 3. It separates the message from the messenger.** When a governing body member makes a pointed criticism of a manager during an evaluation, it can sting. But when the same criticism is presented as a data point in a comprehensive evaluation report, it often feels less personal and more actionable.
- 4. It focuses on opportunities.** When structured correctly, the evaluation is a forward-looking process, focused on aligning the council's expectations with the manager's performance. The best processes are results-oriented, increasing collaboration and contributing to the success of both the manager and the governing board.

It can be helpful when the evaluation includes a 360-degree assessment, with staff offering

feedback. Managers can learn some important things by hearing from their direct reports. This can be done through either interviews or a survey instrument.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

A word of caution: Numbered rating systems are popular for performance evaluations—but whether the governing body uses a facilitator or not, a numbered rating system is never helpful. Evaluating someone's performance is a complex process, and reducing it to a scale of 1 to 5 helps neither the evaluated nor the evaluators. Some people are "hard graders" and others just check the top box. Some will use numerical ratings to avoid providing specific, meaningful feedback, and these ratings reduce the amount of feedback provided to the manager, and often produce a muddled and confusing result without clear direction to the manager.

Some elected officials may balk at paying for a process that they believe they can do themselves, but given the significant investment that governing bodies make in their managers, the number of staff and budgets that managers are responsible for, and the importance of assessing and correcting course as needed, the cost of facilitation is minimal when considered alongside the benefits.

This process can act as an investment by creating cost savings from avoiding breakdowns in the council-manager relationship, which could result in premature departures of the manager, terminations, and significant expense for severance payments and legal costs. A facilitated process is an efficient way to assist the council and manager in conveying the gift of meaningful feedback that is not only needed but deserved by a council appointee.

DATA-GATHERING/SOFTWARE RESOURCES

Performance evaluation software can be an effective tool to help the elected body prepare the manager's evaluation. Many programs are available, enabling elected bodies to have as much or as little input into the rating categories as they

wish. Some programs come with rating categories already provided for a variety of positions; some allow the customer to provide the categories; and some are a hybrid. This flexibility allows the elected officials to create a customized rating tool that works best for them.

Some evaluation software programs allow for multiple raters and some for a single rater. If the program allows for only a single rater, all elected officials convene to discuss each category, agree on the rating, and offer comments, while one person enters the rating and comments into the software program. In this case, the elected officials need to trust that all opinions are being heard and recorded. It is then important that all elected officials review the final draft and offer feedback before it is given to the manager.

If a multi-rater system is used, elected officials will complete the evaluation individually, so it is recommended that there be group discussion beforehand to ensure a consistent understanding of the meaning of the rating categories and the elected officials' views of the manager's

performance. The elected officials should also meet after they have entered their ratings because the evaluation is a group activity, not a multiple individual activity.

A word of warning regarding the multi-rater approach: It may be difficult to ensure that everyone fully participates in the process; elected officials won't be informed by each other's comments; and consensus can be hard to achieve. Thus, if some elected officials provide more commentary than others, they could skew the overall evaluation.

Even with the use of software, an in-person conversation between the elected body and the manager is needed to review the evaluation and discuss the results.

As noted, many software programs are available. ICMA's Membership Team (careers@icma.org) can assist with the latest tools, as can SHRM. Also, ICMA members can post a question on [ICMA Connect](#) to see what tools other members are using.

SECTION 6

CONCLUSION

Communication. That is the essential element to maintaining a good relationship between an elected board and the appointed manager. Communication comes in many forms, but the board's evaluation of the manager is a formalized method of communication that should not be overlooked.

The ICMA task force that was formed to develop this guide compiled and considered the best practices for manager evaluations. The group shared numerous ideas and learned a great deal from each other. The final product demonstrates that just as each manager and board is unique, so too must be the evaluation process for each manager. While there are common methods of evaluation, the tools and methods used to evaluate one manager in one community may not be appropriate for another manager in a neighboring community. To maximize legitimacy and effectiveness and to enhance communication,

a manager's evaluation needs to be tailored to the issues and stated goals of the elected body.

That said, the task force also agreed that there are some standard elements—notably, the [ICMA Practices for Effective Local Government Management and Leadership](#)—that would enhance any evaluation. These 14 core competencies are the framework for what a manager does on a day-to-day basis, and they warrant acknowledgment in the evaluation process.

Finally, while this guide offers a variety of ideas, the most important takeaways are that a manager's evaluation must take place and that the process must be mutually agreed upon. There are many ways to get this done, but the manager and the board both deserve the structured communication that the evaluation provides.

SECTION 7

RESOURCES

[ICMA Practices for Effective Local Government Management and Leadership](#)

[Recruitment Guidelines for Selecting a Local Government Administrator](#)

[ICMA Model Employment Agreement](#) (available to ICMA members)

[ICMA Code of Ethics with Guidelines](#)

ICMA's Membership Team (careers@icma.org) can provide examples of performance evaluation forms and tools. Members are also encouraged to post questions on [ICMA Connect](#) to see what other members are using.

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