Performance counseling offers the department chair a valuable communications tool that, properly used, can significantly enhance relations with faculty members and improve the department’s chances for obtaining its goals. Performance counseling is here defined as a regular although not necessarily formal contact between the department chair and individual faculty members for the purpose of discussing successes and failures in completing assignments and duties. We use the term performance counseling with full recognition that campus policy may prescribe performance evaluation. Often these terms are used interchangeably. The terms, however, imply different actions. A chair, for example, may evaluate a faculty member without offering any counsel or advice. Also, a chair may offer counsel that is not derived from a formal evaluation.

WORKING WITH CAMPUS POLICY

Many institutions have policies requiring formal performance evaluation for faculty and staff. Often campus policy prescribes who is evaluated, by whom, when, and on what criteria. For example, campus policy may require the annual evaluation of untenured faculty but have no such stipulation for tenured full professors. The procedures for evaluating staff are typically more inclusive. Campus policy is likely to require the department chair to conduct performance evaluations of all staff on a regular basis. The institution’s policy may also stipulate how performance evaluation is to be documented. For example, the evaluation of staff performance may require the completion and submission of a standard form that is used across campus. Often department chairs need to file their evaluations of staff members with a central office of personnel services. Evaluations of untenured faculty may need to be forwarded to the academic dean. At some institutions, department chairs are required to use a specific form for the purpose of evaluating faculty. At other colleges and universities, policy may require the chair and faculty member to cosign a letter that summarizes the content of the performance evaluation. Still other institutions may have no formal requirement for documenting the performance evaluation session.
Department chairs need to recognize that the campus policy for conducting performance evaluations for faculty and staff serves as the minimum requirement. As the administrator responsible for the success and development of the academic department, chairs have the authority to implement strategies to safeguard and cultivate department success. A program of ongoing performance counseling should be one of those strategies. Department chairs can structure a program of ongoing performance counseling even when the campus policy does not require regular performance review or performance review for all department members. Chairs can also implement procedures for documenting performance counseling even when campus policy does not require it.

**MAKING PERFORMANCE COUNSELING PRODUCTIVE**

Many department chairs admit that the task of evaluating faculty and staff performance is uncomfortable. As Higgerson (1996) points out, that discomfort is understandable for two reasons. First, department chairs perceive themselves as “criticizing” one-time faculty and staff colleagues. Second, for many department chairs there is a natural fear of confrontation. Higgerson suggests that department chairs conceptualize the task as one of “coaching” rather than “criticizing” department members. The term *performance counseling* is more appropriate to the task than the term *performance evaluation* because it implies that the ultimate purpose is to help individuals succeed. When individuals satisfy performance expectations, the department is more likely to achieve its mission. Department chairs are responsible for reviewing needed improvements as well as achievements. By working from the initial premise that the chair wants individual department members to advance professionally, the task of suggesting areas of needed improvement is more palatable for both chair and department member. Criticism or suggestions for improvement are easier to hear and accept when it is clear that the department chair believes the individual department member can satisfy performance expectations and succeed professionally. Consequently, trading the role of critic or judge for that of coach not only makes the task of reviewing individual performance more comfortable, it makes the outcome more positive for both the chair and department member.

Performance counseling is a person-specific activity in that individuals are not seeking to achieve the same goals nor are they motivated by the same rewards. Further, not all department members have the same job responsibilities and, therefore, individual achievement cannot be measured by the same criteria. It is also unlikely that all individuals will be at the same stage of their careers. Tenured full professors must be approached differently from untenured faculty in tenure-track appointments. Similarly, department chairs are likely to review full-time faculty using different criteria.
than they employ to evaluate and coach part-time faculty. In short, department chairs need to approach each faculty and staff member differently. The starting point for each department member should be that individual’s job description. It is impossible to review job performance without full knowledge of that individual’s assigned duties and responsibilities. Job responsibilities become the standard against which performance can be assessed. The other important element is the university standard for promotion. For example, a new assistant professor may be hired with responsibilities for teaching, conducting research, and service. It is the specific criteria for obtaining tenure and promotion to the rank of associate professor that guides the untenured assistant professor in knowing what activities and achievements are expected. Using information about job responsibilities and promotion criteria, the department chair can coach individual department members to determine specific and manageable performance goals. Since part-time faculty have little, if any, opportunity for promotion, department chairs may substitute criteria for professional advancement for promotion criteria. For example, the part-time faculty member may need to complete a doctorate in order to be qualified for a full-time continuing position.

In the case of staff, new staff usually are hired with a probationary period of some specified length. During this period, the department chair may have a good opportunity to work closely with an employee who is motivated and receptive to suggestions. Although it sometimes takes a considerable investment of time and energy to orient and train a new employee, that investment may pay important dividends. Expectations are made clear, lines of authority and communication are established, performance standards are set, and the new employee learns enough to be able to perform his or her functions independently. The personal contact one invests in a new employee can also result in a healthy bonding of that person to the department. Competence and loyalty are two of the products of such a healthy induction process.

Performance counseling is a time-consuming activity in that department chairs must work individually with all department members. Effective performance counseling requires more than the usual annual meeting with an individual department member. When faculty perform well, continuous performance counseling serves to acknowledge good performance and encourage more of the same. In instances of unsatisfactory performance, continuous performance counseling serves to remedy problematic performance and motivate the individual to invest the effort needed to improve. Although time consuming, ongoing performance counseling is more effective than a program of annual review because the evaluative comments are more timely and, therefore, more beneficial. Both positive and negative evaluative statements carry more meaning when they are delivered in relation to a specific event and not tucked in a file for discussion at some future review.
ADDRESSING UNSATISFACTORY PERFORMANCE

Unsatisfactory performance is handled most effectively if it is identified early. Early detection of an unhealthy situation allows time for diagnosis and remediation. Even when the campus policy requires, for example, only an annual meeting with untenured faculty, the department chair must meet on a more regular basis with a faculty member who is not making acceptable progress toward tenure. Particularly in instances when faculty are not making satisfactory progress toward tenure and promotion, the chair will want to document the ongoing performance counseling efforts. This documentation should include specific information regarding the need to alter or improve performance and the suggestions made by the department chair for doing so. Higgerson (1996, 133–34) notes that it is especially important for documentation of performance counseling to be written with “third person clarity.” In other words, anyone should be able to tell from the written record what issues were discussed, the weight given to each issue, and the specific recommendations made for improving performance. This document serves as a guideline for the individual who needs to improve and becomes a benchmark for assessing that individual’s future achievements.

Dealing with unsatisfactory performance need not be uncomfortable for either the department chair or the department member. Higgerson (1996, 108 ff.) offers some specific communication strategies for managing face-to-face performance counseling sessions. Several of these strategies are particularly useful when engaged in performance counseling with a department member who has unsatisfactory performance.

Make performance counseling a year-round (not yearly) activity. This reduces the anxiety that might be associated with an annual performance evaluation session. Higgerson points out that by “increasing the frequency of evaluation, it is easier for a department chair to keep performance counseling in a ‘coaching’ mode. It is much harder to shed the role of ‘judge’ or ‘critic’ if once each year the department chair summons the faculty to a formal evaluation session and it is the only time in which they hear evaluative comments about their job performance.” (Higgerson, 1996, 108 ff.).

Offer both formal and informal evaluations of job performance. Higgerson notes that “delayed praise is rarely effective. In the same manner, constructive suggestions for improved performance have less impact if the chair withholds them until the annual performance evaluation session.” (Higgerson,
1996, 109). Some department chairs begin each department meeting with announcements of achievements. These positive evaluations might include statements like, “A special thanks to Professor McCauliff who conducted an invaluable training session for beginning teaching assistants.” Praise delivered publicly gives special recognition to the individual receiving it. Public praise also sends a clear signal concerning what is valued in the department. On the other hand, suggestions for improvement should never be made in front of colleagues. Not only is the individual in question embarrassed, but also colleagues are left uncomfortable, wondering when they might be similarly humiliated in public. Public criticism of individuals is a good way to destroy trust within a department. Also keep in mind that evaluative comments, whether positive or negative, will be more genuine and have greater meaning if they are offered in the context of the activity being observed.

**Make job performance expectations clear.** When department members do not understand the expectations of their job performance, it is difficult, if not impossible, to satisfy expectations. Sometimes unsatisfactory performance can be remedied by helping the individual understand the expectations for job performance. New faculty, for example, need help understanding the institution’s guidelines for promotion and tenure. The campus policy is usually written in general language so as to apply to all disciplines. The department chair needs to help faculty translate such general phrases as “demonstrated record of teaching effectiveness” into specific behaviors and achievements that will satisfy the standard.

**Make performance goals specific and manageable.** This is especially important in dealing with unsatisfactory performance. Improvement is more likely if the steps to improvement are specific and manageable. For example, the faculty member who is not performing satisfactorily in the classroom may need first to learn how to write a syllabus. The performance goal of writing a syllabus that the faculty member may review with the department chair is a specific and manageable performance goal. This prescription is more likely to result in improved job performance than charging that faculty member with the goal of becoming a “better teacher.”

**Focus evaluative comments on the person’s performance, not personality.** Most people are better able to accept constructive suggestions and review their own performance objectively when they
are not defensive. By focusing comments on performance rather than personality, department chairs make it clear that the behavior needing remedy is not an inherent character defect in the individual. It is easier for those with unsatisfactory performance to hear what they should do in very specific terms than to listen to how they are “ineffective” or “deficient.”

**Link evaluative comments to specific examples.** This strategy will also help reduce defensiveness. It also helps the individual faculty or staff member understand what behavior needs to be remedied. Most important, it gives the individual something to change. It’s one thing to tell a faculty member that students perceive him or her as inaccessible and quite another to tell a faculty member that students are more likely to perceive him or her as inaccessible if office hours are not posted on the door and kept. The former is a label that is likely to make one defensive, and the latter is a specific action that one can take.

**Link self-evaluation and goal setting.** Faculty and staff need to leave performance counseling sessions with a commitment to follow through on constructive suggestions. This is less likely to happen if department chairs merely present individuals with a list of goals. The more that faculty and staff are involved in generating their goals for the next performance counseling session, the more likely they will take ownership of them and have a commitment to carrying them out. Some chairs find it useful to have faculty come to a performance counseling session with a list of goals. Others deduce goals from the discussion with faculty. The best list of goals will be one that the faculty member believes is manageable and that the chair knows will result in acceptable progress toward tenure and promotion.

**Offer specific suggestions for improvement.** Department chairs need to realize that unsatisfactory performance often causes the individual to be frustrated and anxious. General suggestions are useless and may only aggravate the situation. Department chairs need to be very specific in offering suggestions for improvement. When counseling an individual with unsatisfactory performance, it is imperative that the individual know precisely what to do and how to begin. Together, the department chair and individual can review possible actions and decide what is feasible and helpful. This, too, serves to build the individual’s commitment for improving performance.
Establish a time frame for achieving goals. Department chairs need to structure an ongoing review process, particularly in the case of unsatisfactory performance. By setting a date for reviewing progress, department chairs make it clear that performance counseling will be ongoing and that the individual is expected to try the suggested improvements. It is important that the time frame is appropriate to the remedy being tried. If the suggestion is to work on a course syllabus, the chair needs to show samples and give the faculty member sufficient time to draft a syllabus. The effort will be maximally effective if the chair and faculty member can review the syllabus before the next semester begins. In general, suggestions for improved performance carry more meaning if they are timed with the activity to which they relate.

Recognize and reward positive achievement. It is particularly important to notice progress in individuals who have unsatisfactory performance. Even when the action doesn’t completely remedy the situation, acknowledgment of the effort made, recognition of even limited improvement, and additional suggestions for continued improvement can help motivate faculty and staff to continue working to meet expectations. This also has the effect of making individual improvement (and eventual success) a team effort. It places the chair alongside the faculty or staff member as they strive to remedy unsatisfactory performance.

BENEFIT OF PERFORMANCE COUNSELING

Effective performance counseling is a key ingredient in building an effective department. When department members perform at optimal levels in behavior that supports the department mission and objectives, they contribute to the department’s success. Further, performance counseling serves as a vehicle for chairs to make sure that every individual department member understands how their job contributes to the welfare and success of the entire department. Through performance counseling, department chairs can clarify the department mission and individual job responsibilities. This helps individual department members perceive themselves as members of a team with responsibility to the total department and not merely independent agents who happen to be housed in particular units. As chair you will also reap important benefits from your consistent pursuit of ongoing performance evaluation. The common understanding of the department mission and sense of teamwork translates into less department conflict, greater acceptance of change, and a more productive department culture. In
addition, department chairs who engage in effective performance counseling bolster their credibility with department members. Performance counseling provides an opportunity for department chairs to demonstrate their genuine interest in the welfare and professional development of every department member. In this regard, even individuals with unsatisfactory performance are likely to appreciate the efforts of a department chair to help them improve and succeed in meeting department and university criteria for promotion. Furthermore, by working reflectively with an individual who is not meeting expected standards, you may have the opportunity of helping that person rethink their goals. It is then possible for departure to take place as a positive initiative on the part of the individual rather than as a negative rejection by the institution.

Individual department members benefit from effective performance counseling in many ways. They do not need to guess at performance expectations or wonder if they are making satisfactory progress toward promotion and professional advancement. This in turn reduces the potential for grievances filed by department members who do not understand why they were denied promotion or tenure or why they received a low merit rating. Individual department members benefit from learning the department chair’s assessment of their contribution. This information helps individual department members prioritize their activities. They know how to invest their time effectively and efficiently in assignments and activities that are consistent with performance expectations and that will lead to tangible rewards. When individual department members fail to satisfy performance expectations, they benefit immeasurably from hearing their chair’s suggestions for improvement. This consistent coaching can be a lifeline for those who initially have difficulty meeting performance expectations.