

How to measure an employee's 'intangible' traits

As part of the performance-review process, supervisors are typically called upon to evaluate employees on the basis of intangible factors, such as cooperativeness, dependability and judgment. The higher up the organizational chart, the more important those traits become.

Yet most supervisors find intangibles the most difficult factors to evaluate, probably because they seem so personal.

Rather than assessing concrete behavior, you may feel as though you are evaluating someone's personality or human merit. While intangible factors may seem personal, they're important to maintaining effective working relationships and getting the job done.

Match traits to the job

One key to assessing an employee's intangibles is to ask yourself which traits are vital for each job. Cooperativeness may be critical for a staffer working on a team, but not for a security guard working the night shift. Initiative would be key for a product development manager, but less so for a payroll clerk.

Before performing an employee's review, critically review the intangible factors included in the person's performance standards. You should be able to comfortably answer the question: "Why is this employee rated on this measure?"

Remember, every performance measure should be rooted in a concrete operational goal.

Match traits to behavior

You can't help being subjective when evaluating intangible factors. But you can avoid bias by focusing on *concrete* examples of instances in which the employee displayed positive or negative behavior regarding a particular trait.

Keep good documentation during the year, preferably by keeping an ongoing, simple performance log for each employee. It should track specific examples of the person's positive and negative performance and behavior. Include notes on intangibles as you go.

When it's time to discuss intangibles during feedback or formal review, do your best to tie those traits to tangible examples of workplace wins and losses.

For example, you might say, "I was pleased by your efforts to solve that customer's problem last week. You defined the problem, considered possible causes, brought together a team and solved the issue quickly. Your actions demonstrated initiative and sound judgment; you didn't try to do it all yourself. You took responsibility for solving the problem, but you knew when to ask for help."

Performance-Review checklist: Evaluating employees' intangible characteristics

As part of the performance-review process, supervisors can use the following questions to help quantify the intangible qualities in their employees.

PLANNING

1. Does the employee set verifiable short- and long-term goals?
2. Are the employee's goals in tune with company needs?
3. Does the employee's planning show sound assumptions reflecting the company's goals and resources?
4. Does the employee typically achieve expected results?

ORGANIZATION

5. Is the employee aware of what is going on in his or her department, including who is doing what?
6. Does the employee know what the department can do in an emergency?
7. Does the employee do a good job of delegating work according to subordinates' abilities?

INTELLIGENCE

8. Does the employee see relationships between facts and draw appropriate conclusions quickly?
9. Does the employee learn from experience?

JUDGMENT

10. When confronted with an emergency, does the employee quickly recognize the most important priorities?
11. Does the employee appreciate the financial implications of his or her decisions?
12. Does he or she make decisions quickly, but not hastily?

INITIATIVE

13. Does the employee anticipate what has to be done?
14. Does the employee perform well in the absence of superiors?
15. Has the employee made original suggestions to improve operations?

LEADERSHIP

16. Does the employee explain rather than command?
17. Do people listen closely when he or she speaks?
18. Does the employee spell out the benefits of doing things his or her way?
19. Does he or she deal smoothly with unexpected developments?