

## **STAFF PERFORMANCE RATINGS**

A central factor underlying accountability and oversight processes is personal accountability of managers and staff for their performance. The crucial tool for this purpose is systematic and periodic staff performance ratings.

The UN's weak personnel selection policies are both long-standing and widely-known. At any point along the way since 1945, they could have been counteracted and corrected by carefully assessing staff performance to identify and reward high-achievers while weeding out unsatisfactory staff.

Far back in the 1950s the General Assembly required a detailed study of the efficiency of UN Secretariat operations. In the 1970s major efforts were urged to compare programme results to budgeted intentions, and in 1985 the Secretariat agreed, after sharp criticism from Member States, to finally begin to determine, and report on, "what has been done, to what effect." But all these efforts foundered on stultifying budgetary procedures, elaborate six-year medium term plans, and other input rituals.

Even more fundamentally, of course, IO Watch believes that the situation also reflects the very strong unwillingness of the Administration to subject its barons, time-servers and "deadwood" to a frank, systematic, and periodic assessment of their non-performance.

Ever since the 1970s, and particularly from the 1990s onward, much serious and productive work has been done around the world to establish performance management and measurement systems in private and public organizations, and to replace rigid control systems with new management cultures which seek continuous improvement of performance and results.

Marc Holzer and Arie Halachmi, "Measurement as a means of accountability", International Journal of Public Administration, 19(11/12), 1996, pp. 1921-1944,  
"Mini-forum: Results act results", The Public Manager (USA) , 29(1), Spring 2000, pp. 17-32,  
Andy Neely, Measuring business performance, The Economist Books, London, 1998, pp. 1-7,  
Public Performance & Management Review (formerly Public Productivity and

Management Review) (USA), Sage Publications, affiliated with Rutgers University, AASPA, and AACPM, 1976-present.

Other United Nations system agencies have undertaken related efforts to establish integrated strategic planning, performance management, and accountability systems, in order to make themselves more responsive to rapid change and to their clienteles' changing needs.

"Accountability, management improvement, and oversight in the United Nations system", Joint Inspection Unit, UN document A/50/507, **1995**, Chapter VI, pp. 29-36.

The UN, however, while making some progress on broader performance management, has held on tightly to its one and only fully-established performance management component -- a 50-year old system of periodic performance ratings for staff (now called "performance appraisal"). The traditional reports over the decades were always focused on personal attributes rather than on work done, and the system was always very carelessly implemented and poorly monitored.

The Thornburgh report of 1993 expressed discouragement at the continuing poor performance ratings system.

"One of the major disappointments of my tenure was our failure to devise a new performance evaluation system. The present scheme is virtually useless as 'ratings inflation' has produced positive assessments for anearly all (90 per cent) of our staff members. The present practice thus deprives the Organization of both the ability to reward superior performance and to sanction sub-standard performance. A system where all are rated superior is one where none are superior."

Dick Thornburgh, Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management, "Report to the Secretary-General of the United Nations" ["The Thornburgh report"], **1 March 1993**, pp. 10-11.

Despite no less than five attempts at reforming it, his successor as the UN's senior manager, herself a former junior UN staff member, commented in 1993 that

"The performance evaluation system absolutely must be changed. I can't even find a polite word to describe it. It's an insult to both the people rating and the people being rated."

"Former staffer comes in as UN's top manager", Secretariat News (New York), **July-August 1993**, page 7, as described in

"Toward a new system of performance appraisal in the United Nations Secretariat: Requirements for successful implementation", Joint Inspection Unit, UN document A/49/219, **1994**, para 66.

A 1993 JIU report had also noted the sharp criticisms of

the performance appraisal processes from all sides, the "Group of 18" calls for an annual Secretary-General's report on this topic, and the Secretary-General's report of 1990 stating that a new system with numerical ratings to permit comparisons would be introduced in 1991. However, in 1993 discussions on this effort were still continuing. The JIU concluded that:

*"Thus, criticism continues that the Secretariat has too much 'deadwood' doing too little work and too few good staff doing too much. The performance appraisal system gives positive assessments for nearly all (90) percent of staff, thereby depriving the Organization of the ability to reward superior performance and to sanction sub-standard performance. Therefore, establishing a new system should be a 'high priority.' [A] 1993 ICSC report observed that while most performance processes in the United Nations system are now task/performance-based (i.e., accomplishments and results) or moving in that direction, the United Nations clings to a subjective personality trait/professional-conduct type system (i.e., 'dependability,' 'oral expression,' 'competence.' In addition, the existing Secretariat system provides no performance appraisal for senior Directors and policy-making officials of the Secretariat (D-2 level and above.)"*

Joint Inspection Unit, "Accountability and oversight in the United Nations Secretariat", UN document A/48/420, **1993**, paras. 133-136,

"Report of the Group of High-Level Intergovernmental Experts to Review the Efficiency of the Administrative and Financial Functioning of the United Nations," UN document A/41/49, **1986**, Recommendation 51, and

"Analytical report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of General Assembly resolution 41/213", UN document A/45/226 of **17 April 1990**, para. 188. [emphasis added]

The General Assembly showed its continuing concern in 1993. It called on the Secretary-General "to undertake without delay a complete review of the performance evaluation system," in consultation with ICSC, in order to develop it into "an effective system that accurately assesses staff performance and improves staff accountability." It also requested him to ensure that staff regulations concerning separation from service will be effectively applied to staff members whose performance evaluations are consistently poor [that is, to fire them, which apparently has never occurred in the UN ratings process, in the past or at present.]

"Personnel questions," General Assembly resolution 47/226 of **30 April 1993**, Part I.B, paras. 3, 7.

In February 1994 a staff task force emphasized an "overwhelming consensus" that the existing system was not working and "is no longer acceptable to anyone." It stated that:

Managers find it:

- a meaningless chore which obliges them to give inflated evaluations either to avoid confrontation or the lengthy rebuttal system;
- an inadequate tool for performance management;
- lacking any guiding standards for the written narrative required to accompany ratings.

Staff find it:

- based on standards and expectations of which they are not made aware;
- an insufficient instrument for providing performance feedback;
- a poor measure of their performance as no real distinction is made between excellent and poor performers.

The Administration finds it:

- of limited usefulness as a measure of performance for comparative purposes;
- a poor - although essential - basis for a number of personnel decisions/administrative actions;
- lacking an element of managerial performance/not providing for management accountability;
- too often resulting in costly, tie-consuming and counterproductive rebuttal procedures."

"Introduction of a new design for a performance evaluation system," a memorandum from the USG, DAM to heads of UN departments/offices of **17 February 1994**, as described in

Joint Inspection Unit, "Toward a new system of performance appraisal in the United Nations Secretariat: Requirements for successful implementation", UN document A/49/219, **1994**, p. 17.

The 1994 JIU report on UN performance appraisal devoted almost half its text to the requirements for successful implementation of the new system to be established. They included a broader accountability system; top management leadership; the critical role of managers; work programmes and standards; ratings, comparisons, rewards, and sanctions; responsibility for system implementation; and the critical constraints and adjustments -- training, timing, and resources. It concluded that:

"... organizations, like people, must strive to learn from their mistakes. Sound and transparent performance appraisal and performance management are central elements in establishing a more effective United Nations and bolstering the organization's credibility. Having failed to effectively implement such a system in the past, the Secretariat must now demonstrate convincingly that, this time, it can establish and apply accountability and high-quality performance as day-to-day priorities throughout the Organization.

The new performance appraisal system is all the more important ... to make a fundamental change in the organizational climate throughout the United Nations Secretariat. Under the old performance evaluation system, good or bad performance simply had no consequences. Now, performance, results, and fulfillment of programme mandates and objectives must become the central elements of the work of staff at all levels."

Joint Inspection Unit, "Toward a new system of performance appraisal in the United Nations Secretariat: Requirements for successful implementation", UN document A/49/219, **1994**, p. 17.

Secretariat actions since this challenge was issued have not been very impressive. In 1996, after an elaborate preparation process, OHRM introduced the sixth attempt to fix this problem, a new Performance Appraisal System (PAS). Its original cumbersome design foundered badly and alienated staff and managers. After serious remodeling, it was reissued and has gradually become

routine, and the new procedures have even been praised by some outsiders.

"PAS: Unloved and unneeded", UN Staff Report (New York), **December 1996**, p. 8,

"System to assess staff performance, introduced as key to management culture, seems slated for oblivion", International Documents Review, **16 June 1997**, p. 2, and

"Open revolt: Evaluation mutiny", excerpted from Washington Times, by Betsy Pusic, June 16, 1997, in UN Special, **July-August 1997**, p. 6,

As always in the UN, implementation of the new system is not as simple as proclaiming it and formulating its policies. The Secretary-General's 2002 reform progress report noted that the system had been revised again, with all units "expected" to use the system by April 2003, i.e., seven long years after the system was introduced. The PAS system had been also been revised, for instance, to require that all reporting officers must complete appraisals for all staff prior to their departure to a new job (a seemingly obvious duty in any normal organization, but one that had been ignored in the UN for decades).

The 2002 Secretariat report stated that, in future, OHRM would develop "an expanded ability" to do qualitative as well as quantitative analyses of PAS implementation, would link PAS data to other electronic systems (an action which had first been recommended to no effect in 1988), and would develop "support guides" for staff and managers.

"Human resources management reform: Report of the Secretary-General," UN document A/57/293 of **8 August 2002**, paras. 51-54.

As usual, however, there are major "holes" in Secretariat implementation, which suggest that monitoring and enforcement of this process still leave much to be desired.

-- The US GAO report in 2000 on UN efforts to establish human resource management reforms (which found that the process was only about 25 percent complete) also found that under the new PAS system only 0.1 percent -- i.e. one out of every thousand -- Secretariat staff were "unsatisfactory" performers, an unbelievably small number, especially in an organization with so many recognized performance problems as the UN.

-- Similarly, a major feature insisted on by the General Assembly in the new system was that the "barons," for the first time ever, would also be rated on their own performance. But a JIU report on senior officials in 2000 (four years after the overall system was established) found that only one Under- and one Assistant-Secretary-General

(out of dozens in total) had ever had their performance evaluated.

-- As discussed in the Staff Rights? subsection under Where is the Rule of Law? in this archive, the right to rebut performance ratings has always been one of the most important staff rights and protections against abusive managers. However, there are stories that UN staff are strongly discouraged from contesting ratings and filing rebuttals under the PAS, in order to make this new system appear to be a "success story" after 50 years of crushing failures in rating staff performance, which is of course a major victory for abusive UN managers if true.

-- There are also stories that some units are accorded favored treatment under the PAS to bolster their reputations, such as extra high ratings for the staff in the much-maligned peace-keeping department, a manipulation which of course undermines the entire merit basis and credibility of the PAS system.

-- Finally, there seems to be little if any reporting provided to the General Assembly or anyone else on the ratings patterns and results, even though, as noted above, the "Group of 18" report of 1986 had called for reporting on this topic to be made annually by the Secretary-General.

US General Accounting Office, "United Nations: Reforms are progressing, but overall objectives have not been achieved", GAO/NSIAD-00-169, **May 10, 2000**,

Joint Inspection Unit, "Senior-level appointments in the United Nations, its funds, and programmes," , UN document A/55/423, **2000**, and

"Report of the Group of High-Level Intergovernmental Experts to Review the Efficiency of the Administrative and Financial Functioning of the United Nations," A/41/49, **1986**, recommendation 51.

The issue of proper, consistent, and transparent ratings of UN staff on their performance is the key not only to the entire system of performance management, but to staff rights, a merit-based system, and the credibility and integrity of the UN itself. IO Watch will continue to report on the UN Secretariat's sorry past record and ongoing activities in this area.

For the time being, however, two reports provide very useful overviews and detailed analysis of this issue, the first covering the long past UN history of failed attempts and the specific elements required for successful implementation of the new PAS, the second, of 2003, providing an update on the PAS situation and its implications. They will be expanded upon at a later date in this subsection of the archive.

Joint Inspection Unit, "Toward a new system of performance appraisal in the

United Nations Secretariat: Requirements for successful implementation", UN document A/49/219, 1994, and Houshang Ameri, Fraud, waste and abuse: Aspects of U.N. management and personnel policies, University Press of America, Lanham, MD (USA), June 2003, Chapter IV, "Performance appraisal in the United Nations."

Two excellent quotations summarize the centrally-important staff issues involved in UN staff performance ratings. They were made in the *International Documents Review* in late 1995, but still illustrate clearly the dangers that UN staff face today. The first involved an impasse in staff-management negotiations:

"The joyless nature of the United Nations 50th anniversary was underlined this week by a public spat between the Staff Union and Management [on appeals of poor performance ratings which] ... could have far-reaching implications for the international civil service. ...

The [staff-management joint] agreement that the performance rating resulting from a staff member's challenge to a low evaluation would be binding, was [subsequently] changed by [management with] the addition of a proviso that it was without prejudice to the ultimate authority of the Secretary-General as Chief Administrative Officer.

In effect, Management could ignore a finding in favour of a staff member by invoking the Secretary-General's ultimate authority. ('You know how many people speak in the name of the Secretary-General in this house?' says Staff Committee President Mohammed Oummih, underlining why the change is unacceptable. ...

A general meeting of staff on 10 October endorsed the [related] Staff Council resolution by a vote of 730 to 0 with one abstention ... and said the new performance rating processes] ran 'counter to the provisions of Article 101 of the [UN Charter] ...' "

"Staff-management spat with possible serious impact reflects a joyless 50th anniversary," International Documents Review, 16 October 1995, pp. 1-2. [emphasis added]

The IDR editor then made very perceptive further comments on the hazards that UN staff face versus their managers. IO Watch therefore hopes that the reader will bear with all the "emphasis added":

"In considering ... the account above, it is worth noting that ... a critical question has been avoided: what is the rationale for increasing the vulnerability of staff to unfair and/or arbitrary judgements by administrators? The pat answer to that -- it will allow 'managers to manage' -- is unconvincing because the most serious problem affecting the efficiency and effectiveness of the UN Secretariat has been bad management. ...

The Secretariat reforms proposed by the Secretary-General would do little to improve management. They would, however, remove a range of checks and balances built into the international civil service for the very obvious reason that in a multicultural, multinational context, justice must not only be done but must be seen to be done. While the integrity of the rebuttal process might seem an arcane matter to outsiders, it is the only recourse for a staff member victimized by a bad manager. To weaken it would be to reduce the integrity of the entire structure ...

The United Nations will clearly [face] ... wrenching changes in the period ahead, and it would be both unfair and counterproductive to do away now with the only means staff have to hold managers accountable."

"Staff-management spat with possible serious impact reflects a joyless 50th

anniversary," International Documents Review, 16 October 1995, p. 3.  
[emphasis added]

One final article from 1999 suggests the ugly recent realities concerning "the only means staff have to hold managers accountable." M. L. Fayache analyzed a Geneva case of non-renewal of a fixed-term contract in which the main element was the lack of valid performance evaluation reports. The case was lost, but Fayache called to the attention of the Geneva JAB not only the need for training JAB members in UN administrative law exhibited by the case, but a seemingly total unawareness of UNAT judgments, and therefore precedents, dealing with the PER process. He then listed UNAT judgments where staff were successful in contesting improper PER's, including *inter alia*:

"138 (PEYNADO): '... 'the right of rebuttal of any part of a periodical report and the procedure prescribed for handling such rebuttals afford a valuable protection to the staff member against prejudicial assessment (VI).'

200 (FRACYON): '... the periodic report ... was prepared after the decision not to renew the Applicant's appointment ... The Tribunal orders ... that the said periodic report be excluded from the Applicant's status file (XXI).'

225 (SANDYS): '... for a supervisor to make periodic reports which describe a staff member's performance in unjustifiably favorable terms, which are subsequently retracted, is ... reprehensible ... [this action] displays a measure of insincerity on the part of the Principal Officer which, if tolerated by the Administration, would undermine the very purpose of the ... periodic reports (IV).'

362 (de FRANCHIS): '... the fair and impartial assessment of performance must be considered an essential right of all staff members and that, consequently, the Administration should not spare any means to secure an unimpeachable report. ... [in this case] to have the Applicant's performance assessed by an officer with whom there existed such an extremely strained relationship seriously affected the Applicant's right to have his performance assessed in an impartial way (VIII).'

457 (ANDERSON): 'The Tribunal attaches great importance to the integrity of the PER system and in particular its candour and honesty ... (III).'

569 (ZOUARI): '... The rebuttal panel ... concluded ... that the rules governing PER's had not been fully observed. The Administration took no action regarding this report. The Tribunal finds that the Applicant has suffered considerably as a consequence of numerous irregularities (VIII. )'

772 (ZEID): 'The performance review process was tainted by the failure to identify those persons consulted. In this respect the Applicant has been denied due process.'

800 (MERA RODRIGUEZ): 'As a matter of equal treatment for all staff, an evaluation system such as the PER is efficient only when everyone complies with its procedures. In terms of accountability, and to avoid any favouritism or arbitrariness, management has the duty to ensure that no decision, such as . . . is taken without the assessment of a staff member's performance covering recent years (page 8).'

[This statement is from a memorandum from no less than USG Joseph Connor (then the UN's top manager) himself.]

826 (BELIAYEV): 'Because the evaluation of the Applicant's performance was a factor, it is unacceptable that the decision as to her future was taken before the rebuttal procedure was finalized. The Tribunal does not accept as reasonable DPI's position that the completion of the rebuttal procedure was not material to its decision not renew the applicant's appointment. To accept this proposition would be to render the Organization's entire rebuttal procedure redundant.'

M. L. Fayache, "List of UNAT cases dealing with PER: To the Presiding Officer of the Joint Appeals Board," UN Special (Geneva), **février 1999**, pp. 19-20.

[Note: In all of these cases the JAB and the Administration ignored and denied that dubious performance ratings had been made. Years later, the staff members finally got some recompense from the UNAT, but the uncorrected damage that the improper rating had imposed certainly damaged or destroyed the victims' UN careers.]

If the UN Secretariat is indeed now suppressing or "strongly discouraging" staff rebuttals to performance ratings, and the "internal justice" system process continues to ignore them in any way, it could truly become a death blow to the basic rights of UN staff, and to the integrity of UN performance management.