



Modernizing Performance Evaluations

Replacing annual paperwork with continuous, usable data

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Executive summary

Once a year, a supervisor sits down to write an evaluation for an officer they have not formally assessed in twelve months. They try to remember what happened. They pull a few incidents that stuck in memory, most of them recent. They fill in the form, assign the scores, and file it. The officer signs it, sometimes surprised by what it says. Then everyone moves on for another year. This ritual is nearly universal in public safety, and it does not work. Supervisors cannot accurately recall a year of performance. Officers do not trust a process that feels like paperwork. And worst of all, the record it produces is often inaccurate in ways that come back to hurt the agency later.

This paper makes the case for replacing the annual review with something better: continuous, documented performance data captured as it happens, tied to standards officers know in advance, and rolled up into a formal evaluation that reflects reality instead of memory. This is not about doing more reviews. It is about capturing the truth in real time so the annual review stops being a guess.

A yearly ritual that helps no one

Ask officers what they think of their performance evaluations, and the answer is bleak. In a national survey of more than 2,300 officers, ranging from brand new hires to thirty year veterans, the consensus was clear: performance expectations are too vague, they are not clearly communicated, and the review process is not taken seriously. Officers said they do not feel recognized for their work, and they do not trust bringing problems to their supervisors.

That is a system failing at its two core jobs. An evaluation is supposed to tell an officer where they stand and help them get better. When officers do not know what is expected, do not feel seen, and do not trust the process, the evaluation is just a form. It consumes supervisor time, produces a document nobody believes, and improves nothing.

The annual format is a big part of why. When feedback comes once a year, it arrives too late to act on and too disconnected from the moment to feel real. Good work in February is forgotten by the December review. A correctable habit goes uncorrected for months because no one flagged it when it happened. The whole point of feedback, which is to change behavior while there is still time, is lost.

What the annual review gets wrong

The annual model has specific, predictable flaws. Each one is baked into the format.

Memory does not last a year. No supervisor can accurately recall twelve months of another person's performance. So they rely on what they can remember, which skews heavily toward the last few weeks. This is recency bias, and it means an officer's whole year gets judged by its most recent chapter.

Feedback arrives stale. By the time an issue shows up in an annual review, it is old news. The officer either fixed it long ago or has been repeating it for months. Neither is useful. Feedback works when it is close to the event, not when it is filed under history.

Officers get blindsided. When the annual review is the first time an officer hears about a problem, it lands as an ambush, not coaching. That breeds resentment and kills trust. Feedback should never be a surprise. A surprise means the supervisor sat on it.

Expectations are unclear. Officers often cannot say how their performance is actually measured. When the standard is fuzzy, the score feels arbitrary, and an arbitrary score carries no weight. The foundational guidance on police appraisals is blunt about this: officers should know in advance what is expected, how their job is defined, and how they will be evaluated.

It becomes a formality. Because everyone knows the annual review is a ritual, it gets treated like one. Boxes get checked. Scores drift toward the safe middle or the easy high. And that last flaw is the most dangerous of all, for a reason most agencies underestimate.

The quiet liability hiding in your files

Here is the problem that should worry every chief and sheriff. A broken evaluation system does not just fail to help. It actively creates legal risk.

When the annual review is a formality, supervisors tend to inflate it. It is easier to write "meets expectations" than to document a hard truth and have the difficult conversation. So problem officers accumulate a paper trail of positive evaluations that does not match their actual conduct.

Then something goes wrong. The agency moves to discipline or terminate that officer. And in arbitration or in court, the officer's own personnel file becomes the agency's worst enemy. Years of glowing annual reviews get held up as proof that the agency's discipline is unfair, inconsistent, or pretextual. The inflated evaluations, written to avoid an awkward conversation, now undermine a legitimate decision.

Consider a concrete version. A deputy shows up on time, dresses right, makes proactive stops, and draws few complaints. On paper, a strong performer. But that same deputy is a genuinely dangerous driver, with a documented pattern of accidents and close calls in emergency vehicle operations. If the evaluation rolls all of that into one comfortable overall score, it hides the exact deficiency the agency most needs on record. When that driving causes real harm, the file says the deputy was fine.

This is the hidden cost of evaluations that are not accurate and specific. They do not just waste time. They convert your own records into liabilities. A modern approach fixes this not by being harsher, but by being honest and continuous, so the record reflects what actually happened.

From one big event to a running record

The alternative is straightforward in concept. Stop treating the evaluation as a single yearly event. Start treating it as a running record built from many small, documented moments across the year.

Under this model, performance gets captured close to when it happens. A supervisor notes a strong response to a tough call the week it occurs. A skill gap gets documented and addressed when it shows up, not months later. Recognition lands while the good work is fresh. Each entry is small, specific, and tied to the moment.

The formal review does not disappear. It gets easier and far more accurate, because it becomes a rollup of a year that was actually recorded, not a reconstruction from memory. The supervisor is not straining to recall February. February is already documented. The annual evaluation writes itself from the record.

Leading agencies are already moving this way. Some have shifted to check ins every couple of weeks instead of once a year. The best evaluation systems build in ongoing checkpoints before

the final rating is placed in the file. The pattern is the same across the board: catch performance in real time, then let the formal review summarize it.

The private sector proved this out first. Major companies abandoned the annual ranking model years ago in favor of continuous feedback and coaching. One well known firm saw voluntary attrition drop by roughly a third after making the switch, a sign that people felt more supported and more clearly guided. The lesson transfers directly to public safety, where retention is a constant struggle and clarity is in short supply.

Standards officers know in advance

Continuous feedback only works if it measures against a clear, shared standard. Frequent feedback tied to a vague standard is just frequent guessing.

Sound police appraisal rests on a few principles that do not change with the calendar. Officers should know the standard before they are measured against it. The criteria must be valid, meaning they measure things that actually matter to the job, and reliable, meaning different supervisors apply them the same way. And there is real value in separating the scoring from the raw observations, so the final tabulation is not just one supervisor's gut feeling.

Modernizing evaluations means building on these principles, not abandoning them. The move from annual to continuous is a change in timing and capture. The requirement for clear, valid, reliable standards stays exactly the same. In fact, continuous capture makes those standards easier to uphold, because every entry ties a specific observation to a specific standard while the details are still fresh.

The time problem, and how to solve it

The honest objection to continuous evaluation is time. Supervisors in understaffed agencies already feel stretched. Telling them to give constant feedback sounds like piling on. And without structure, frequent feedback can turn casual, inconsistent, or shallow. These concerns are real, and any agency that ignores them will fail at the rollout.

The answer is not more meetings. It is lighter, faster capture. The goal is to make documenting a single moment take seconds, not to schedule another sit down. When a supervisor can log a

specific observation against a specific standard in the flow of the shift, the burden nearly disappears and the record fills itself in.

Structure is what keeps it from getting sloppy. Prompts tied to defined standards keep the feedback specific instead of vague. A consistent format keeps different supervisors aligned. The system should make the easy path the correct path, so that capturing good data is faster than writing a paragraph from memory a year later. Done right, continuous evaluation takes less total supervisor time than the annual scramble, not more. The work just moves from one painful December to many painless moments.

Turning moments into a picture

The real payoff comes when all those small entries add up. A year of captured moments is not just a better annual review. It is a data set.

With performance documented continuously and tied to standards, an agency can finally see patterns it could never see before. A supervisor can watch an officer's trajectory across the year instead of guessing at it. Leaders can spot a skill gap that shows up across many officers, which points to a training need. They can catch a decline early enough to intervene, rather than discovering it at the annual review when it is already entrenched. And they can identify and recognize genuine strong performers with evidence, not impressions.

This is where a modern evaluation tool earns its place. Command HQ's performance evaluation application, METER, is built around this exact model: capture specific, standard aligned observations as they happen, roll them into accurate formal reviews, and turn the accumulated record into a clear view of how each officer and the agency as a whole are trending. The annual review stops being a dreaded event and becomes a natural summary of a year you actually measured.

Getting off the annual treadmill

You do not have to overhaul everything at once. A practical path looks like this.

- **Define your standards clearly.** Write down what good performance looks like for each role, in plain terms, and make sure officers see it before they are measured against it.
- **Make capture take seconds.** Give supervisors a fast, structured way to log a specific observation in the moment. If it takes longer than a quick note, it will not happen.

- **Coach in real time.** Encourage supervisors to give feedback when the moment is fresh, so nothing in the annual review is ever a surprise.
- **Let the annual review roll up the year.** Build the formal evaluation from the running record instead of from memory. It will be faster to write and far more accurate.
- **Read the trends.** Once the data accumulates, review it by officer, by skill, and across the agency. Let it guide training, recognition, and early intervention.

The point of an evaluation is to change behavior

Strip away the forms and the ratings, and an evaluation has one real purpose: to help an officer perform better and to give the agency an honest record of how they are doing. The annual model fails at both. It relies on memory no one has, delivers feedback too late to use, and produces records that are often inaccurate enough to become liabilities.

Continuous, documented, standard aligned evaluation fixes all three. It captures the truth while it is fresh, coaches while there is still time to change, and builds a record the agency can stand behind. The annual review does not have to be abolished. It just has to stop being a guess. When the year is actually measured, the evaluation finally does its job.