

Analysis of the Myrtle Beach Fire Department's  
Employee Performance Appraisal System

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Certification Statement

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

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## Abstract

The Myrtle Beach Fire Department (MBFD) uses annual performance appraisals to evaluate the overall job performance of employees. The problem is the current annual employee performance appraisal system used by the MBFD does not effectively evaluate the performance of fire department personnel. The purpose of this research was to identify an effective employee appraisal process for the MBFD. The descriptive research method was used to answer five research questions: How do fire department supervisors and employees perceive the current employee appraisal system? What are the current issues affecting employee performance appraisals in the MBFD? How can the MBFD increase the value and effectiveness of employee performance appraisals? How do other departments within the City of Myrtle Beach conduct employee performance appraisals, and does the current system meet their needs? How do other fire departments conduct employee performance appraisals?

An extensive literature review was performed on the topic of performance appraisals. Surveys of MBFD employees were utilized, as well as surveys for City of Myrtle Beach department heads and other fire departments. Personal interviews were conducted with certain City employees and with employees of organizations outside of the fire service.

The findings illustrated that the MBFD is quite similar to other City departments and other fire departments when conducting performance appraisals. Overall, the MBFD employees do not view the process as effective and they desire changes. The results warranted changing the appraisal to a specific job related appraisal designed for the MBFD incorporating a 360-degree assessment component, creating an appraisal policy and providing everyone training on it, making the appraisal process a continuous year-long event with the employee and supervisor meeting quarterly, and changing the reward system.

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## Introduction

Most organizations in both the public and private sector recognize that the heart and soul of the organization are the employees. Without dedicated and hard working employees, the mission of the department will not be attainable. The Myrtle Beach Fire Department (MBFD) understands that the employees are the most valuable resource, and in order to be able to provide excellent service, the MBFD provides employees annual feedback regarding their performance. This feedback is given in the form of an annual performance appraisal that is administered on the anniversary of the employee's date of hire or most recent date of promotion. This type of appraisal is known as an anniversary review (Messmer & Bogardus, 2008).

Performance appraisals, or performance evaluations or reviews as they are also called (Messmer & Bogardus, 2008), are used by most employers as a way to provide employees feedback on how they perform their job, and how they measure up to the organization's expectations (Messmer & Bogardus, 2008). The main purpose of an annual performance appraisal is to improve performance (Bacal, 2004). This can be done through a number of ways. There are several different performance appraisal rating tools and most use some sort of numeric system, supervisor essay, or checklist (Bacal, 2004). One common theme throughout the various ways of appraising an employee's performance is that the rating tool used must be related to the employee's actual job description and what they actually do.

The MBFD is required to use a performance appraisal form that is used city wide. This form is a generic form that requires supervisors to rate an employee's performance in thirteen categories on a scale of one to five, with half-point increments. The form is the same for all positions throughout the City. The problem is the current annual employee performance appraisal system used by the Myrtle Beach Fire Department does not effectively evaluate the

performance of fire department personnel. Since fire department employees have different roles and responsibilities than that of an office worker or landscaper, the process does not work as effectively as it should. The purpose of this research is to identify an effective employee appraisal process for the Myrtle Beach Fire Department. The descriptive research method was used to answer the following research questions: How do fire department supervisors and employees perceive the current employee appraisal system? What are the current issues affecting employee performance appraisals in the MBFD? How can the MBFD increase the value and effectiveness of employee performance appraisals? How do other departments within the City of Myrtle Beach conduct employee performance appraisals, and does the current system meet their needs? How do other fire departments conduct employee performance appraisals?

#### Background and Significance

The City of Myrtle Beach is located along the coast of the Atlantic Ocean in northeastern South Carolina. Myrtle Beach was incorporated as a town in 1937 and as a city in 1957 (City of Myrtle Beach, 2010, p.vii). Myrtle Beach is a popular tourist destination and the center of the Grand Strand, the name given to the area because of the 60-mile stretch of continuous coastline (Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce, 2011, p. 5).

Myrtle Beach has received numerous distinctions and awards for tourism. In 2009, Myrtle Beach was named as a “Favorite Beach” and “Favorite Family Destination” by *Southern Living* magazine. There are 102 local golf courses, and the area was recognized as “The Best Golf Vacation Value in the US” by *USA Today*, and the “Ninth Greatest Golf Destination in the World” by *Golf Digest* magazine (City of Myrtle Beach, 2010, p. vii). The area attracts 14.7 million visitors annually (City of Myrtle Beach, 2010, p. vii). Of the area visitors, 47% stay for a

minimum of eight nights (Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce, 2011, p. 9) and the City estimates an average daily population of 108,000.

The area has seen steady growth and has been one of the fast growing regions in the nation. Since 2004 the population within the Myrtle Beach Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) has increased 21.7% (City of Myrtle Beach, 2010, p. 91), and the number of households within the MSA has grown by 42% (Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce, 2011, p. 17). According to the United States Census Bureau (2009) the City of Myrtle Beach's population was 31,968 in July of 2009, the most recent data available, making it the largest city within Horry County and the thirteenth largest city in South Carolina.

The Myrtle Beach Fire Department was established on October 14, 1936 (Arnel, 2011). The department and is a full-service emergency response organization covering approximately 25 square miles, and currently rated as a Class 1 fire department by the Insurance Services Office (ISO) since 2004. In 2010 the department responded to 10,480 incidents, an increase of 52.4% over the decade (Arnel, 2011). The department has mutual aid agreements with all area departments and is a participant in the state's mutual aid firefighter mobilization program. The department is also contracted by Horry County to provide coverage to unincorporated areas that border the City.

The MBFD employees 158 fulltime employees and one part-time employee. There are two divisions within the department, the Emergency Services Division and the Technical Services Division. The Emergency Services Division makes up the bulk of the organization with 144 employees. These employees are divided into three shifts that staff six fire stations located throughout the City. The work schedule is 24-hours on duty, 48-hours off duty. The department staffs and operates five engine companies, two truck companies, one quint company, one heavy

rescue company, two medium rescue companies, two advanced life support (ALS) ambulances, and one medical quick response unit. The department also has two reserve engines, one reserve truck, one hazardous materials unit, one technical rescue unit, and one reserve ambulance. Three battalion chiefs serve as shift commanders, and each operate a shift. There is one captain and nine lieutenants assigned to each shift. Full staffing for each shift is forty-eight personnel, with eight vacation slots available daily.

The department is tasked with responding to all fire related emergencies within the City. The department also provides emergency medical care in the form of two ALS ambulances that provide transport, as well as equipping all fire units as first responders for medical emergencies. All MBFD firefighters must maintain Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) certifications, and thirty-one are paramedics. Hazardous Material response also falls under the MBFD realm of responsibility, and all emergency service employees are trained to, and required to maintain, Hazardous Materials Technician certification. Finally, the department is a host site for the South Carolina Urban Search and Rescue Type II Regional Rescue Team.

Training and Fire Prevention fall under the Technical Services Division. The Fire Marshal leads Fire Prevention which is responsible for fire inspections, fire investigations, public education, and pre-incident surveys. Fire Prevention completed over 4,500 fire inspections in 2010, as well as having 66,000 public education contacts (Arnel, 2011). Reporting to the Fire Marshal are two fire prevention officers and one public education officer.

Training is responsible for coordinating all of the fire, medical, hazardous materials, rescue and any other specialty training throughout the department. Training is also responsible for ensuring all federal, state, and local training requirements are met, in addition to satisfying all ISO requirements. In 2010, MBFD personnel logged over 62,000 hours of training (Arnel,

2011). The Battalion Chief of Training supervises two training officers in addition to overseeing the 12-acre training center.

Rounding out the department personnel are the Fire Chief, Assistant Fire Chief, Battalion Chief of Administration, two administrative assistants, one supply clerk, and one fulltime and one part-time mechanic.

As required by the City Policy Manual, performance appraisals are conducted annually. They are due on the anniversary of the employee's date of hire or the anniversary date of the employee's most recent promotion (City of Myrtle Beach, 2005). The fire department complies with this, and they are usually completed between one to three weeks before the due date. Although they are completed every year, they are not as effective as they could be, thus not providing employees the best performance feedback possible.

The appraisal consists of thirteen categories for all employees, and an additional six for supervisors. Each category consists has three descriptive anchor statements for the highest score, middle score, and lowest score. The scoring is based on a one to five point scale with half point increments. There is also a comment section where the supervisor is required to provide feedback to the employee. Although there is no formal requirement as to what needs to be provided in those sections.

Within the MBFD the company officer, either a lieutenant or captain, completes the appraisal of their employees, and a battalion chief completes them for lieutenants or captains. Once the appraisal is finished by the company officer, it is sent to the battalion chief. The battalion chief then reviews, it and will discuss it with the officer. The battalion chief will offer insight to the employee's performance, but since the battalion chief may only see the employee infrequently, it is difficult to rate their daily performance.

From the battalion chief, if the final appraisal score is “exceeds expectations” the supervisor will have an appraisal meeting with the employee. If the appraisal is above or below that rating, it is sent to the fire chief for review, and then sent to the city manager. Once it is returned from the city manager, the supervisor will conduct the appraisal meeting with the employee.

There are several reasons why the MBFD performance appraisal system is ineffective. The first is the larger problem which is tied to the City as a whole. The appraisal form used by the MBFD is a generic form that is used for all City employees. This makes it difficult to evaluate a firefighter when the form was created to encompass the jobs of all City employees. Also, the City’s current appraisal system is old and needs to be updated. The current system has been nearly the same for over eighteen years. The current system was revamped slightly in 2001 when two categories were removed from the employee section, some re-wording was done, and half points were added into the scoring. Prior to that it was “quite some time” since the appraisals were updated according to Coleman Randall, the City’s Human Resource Director for the past twenty years (C. H. Randall, personal communication, May 6, 2011). Mr. Randall (2011) further added that the forms used in the 1980’s were more objective based, but at that time a lot of supervisors did not have the ability to properly complete the forms. This forced the City to change. A committee was formed to revamp the system. The committee, made up of City employees, created the trait based system currently used today, with the aforementioned modifications that were made in 2001 (C. H. Randall, personal communication, May 6, 2011).

Another reason employees are not getting the most from the appraisals is the MBFD has not provided enough training to the employees and supervisors on the appraisals. The appraisals are conducted by officers that have had limited training on them. In 2004 the fire department

created a PowerPoint presentation in an attempt to provide standards for each category. This has never been updated and contains items that are no longer relevant. Since the PowerPoint was created, only very minimal training has been provided. Furthermore, there is no City standard for each category and the City provides no formal supervisor training, or employee training, on performance appraisals. Without a set standard, the scores vary from each officer on what they expect and how they rate.

Tied into the performance appraisals are a merit increase on the employee's salary. The raises are either a 1%, 2%, or 3% for an overall score that "meets expectations", "exceeds expectations", or "substantially exceeds expectations" respectively. The perception, however, is that employees and supervisors alike view a 2% as average, when it is actually above average. There are two reasons for this. First, all appraisals that receive a final score of 1% or 3% must be reviewed by the city manager, so the employees look at 1% as being a bad appraisal. Couple that with a scale of 1-3, and since two is in the middle, the assumption is it must mean average. This mindset has supervisors scoring employees that are average higher than they should be.

Providing MBFD employees with effective feedback on their performance will allow them to develop as professionals and work on areas needed for improvement. As they improve as individuals, this in turn will increase the department's overall effectiveness and level of professionalism, which will enable the MBFD to provide a better service. This relates to Unit 11 on Service Quality in the Executive Development course (National Fire Academy, 2010). And increasing the MBFD's professional stature is linked to the United States Fire Administration's goal #4, "Improve the fire and emergency services' professional status" (United States Fire Administration, 2010).

## Literature Review

An initial literature research was conducted on performance appraisals within the fire service at the Learning Research Center (LRC) at the National Fire Academy. Internet searches were also conducted through various online search engines on performance appraisals in the fire service. The literature search was then expanded to include organizations outside of emergency services.

Performance appraisals are an important tool for a fire department. It gives the supervisor time to sit down and discuss an employee's job performance, how they can improve, and to set goals and objectives. Since the appraisal is simply a chance to improve the employee's job performance and should be a positive experience, then why is it often viewed negatively? While conducting this literature review, most articles began with several sentences in the first or second paragraph about how employees and supervisors both view performance appraisals in a negative light. According to Hosea, most people view employee performance appraisals "like a trip to the dentist-an uncomfortable, but necessary event" (Hosea, 2004, p. 93).

On the surface it is easy to understand why people have difficulty with performance appraisals. Often times the employees feel threatened because when they are being evaluated their job and livelihood may be on the line, or a salary increase lies in the balance. Also, a lot of people simply have difficulty being appraised or evaluated (Messmer & Bogardus, 2008).

There are several different types of traditional performance appraisals, and it was important to research them and gain a better understanding. The process currently used by the MBFD is mostly made up of the trait based system, but has a small amount of the behavioral anchored rating scale (BARS). Both of these are used to assess the traits and behaviors that are necessary to perform the job. In both systems the evaluator rates the employee with a numeric

score that best correlates to the performance in provided example statements. BARS appraisal types are intended to reduce biased responses, but it must be specific to the job and record the actions of the employee. A deficiency with BARS is the anchor statements that are correlated to the numeric value are not always accurate to every situation (Messmer & Bogardus, 2008).

Trait based appraisals are often used throughout the entire organization, as is the case with the City of Myrtle Beach. The trait based appraisals are flawed because not all traits apply to all jobs, and due to the high degree subjectivity, their accuracy is frequently questioned (Solie, 2002).

Management by Objectives (MBO) was the type of appraisal used by the MBFD prior to switching to the current one. According to Messmer and Bogardus (2008), MBO was developed in 1954 and has been a very popular system over the years. In MBO, the supervisor and employee sit down and come up with objectives that are truly what the employee does. There are several advantages to this. By having the employee create the objectives at the beginning of the appraisal period, it draws the employee into the process at greater depth, and there is a blueprint for success. Disadvantages are the fact it is time consuming, and the supervisor must be thoroughly trained for it to work effectively (p. 153).

The critical incidents reporting method is built on a list of specific items that are necessary to perform the job (Messmer & Bogardus, 2008). There is a reporting system that is used for the evaluator to document how well the necessary behaviors are performed during critical incidents. The advantages to this type of appraisal are the ability to record the employee's actions while directly performing their job and being directly linked to their job, as well as providing an indicator of what the employee actually did over time. A disadvantage is

the evaluator must be paying attention and maintaining thorough notes throughout the appraisal period (Messmer & Bogardus, 2008).

A job rating checklist is the simplest type of appraisal. A list of questions is created relating to the employee's job that are answered with one or two words, usually yes or no. The evaluator then answers the questions regarding the employee's performance. This can be created and customized for any job, it is not overly time consuming, and it minimizes paperwork. The downside is that it is not easily used on jobs that are dynamic and constantly changing, because when the job changes it requires a new set of questions to be created (Messmer & Bogardus, 2008, p. 154).

A rankings method compares employees in the same group to each other (Messmer & Bogardus, 2008). For example, firefighters would be compared to firefighters, lieutenants compared to lieutenants. The employees within the group are ranked from the best to worst as compared to their specific job performance. The ranking method does not require much training, and it does give an overall picture of how the employees stack up throughout the organization. A major flaw of this system is it is very subjective and the evaluator must rate employees against one another (p. 157).

Even with several established systems of performance appraisals, the research illustrates there are people that believe using performance appraisals is a waste of time, and they simply do not work. No matter what system is used, they all have several characteristics in common. They are usually opinion based, and they only take the evaluator's opinion into consideration which makes them one sided (Heathfield, 2007). This subjectivity seems to be a major complaint with the MBFD process. Performance appraisals are also short sighted, as they are often comprised of events that occurred recently, as they are the freshest in the mind of the evaluator. Susan

Heathfield states, “The traditional process of performance appraisal reflects and underpins an old-fashioned, paternalistic, top-down, autocratic, mode of management that relies on organization charts and fear of job loss to keep the troops in line” (Heathfield, 2007, p. 6).

Gary Gray (2002) shares the view that performance appraisals are a waste of time. He sees them as nothing more than gambling, because the rater is more than likely distorted by evaluator bias (p. 16). Gray offers a couple other reasons why performance appraisals do not work. First, they are not a motivating factor. Salary increases are down, with an average merit raise of less than 4% in 2007, before the height of the current economic troubles (Heathfield, 2007). With the minimal merit raises that are offered, Gray (2002) argues there is little enticement for an employee to work harder to maybe gain an additional half or one per cent raise (p. 16). This is an issue within the MBFD as well. With the system set up for employees to receive a one to three per cent raise in one per cent increments, there is no monetary reward for scoring at the top of the 2% range. That employee will end up only one point from a 3% raise, nearly getting a rating of “substantially exceeds expectations,” yet will receive the same raise as someone that scored at the minimum for the 2% range, which is nine points lower. The mindset then becomes the employee can do less and still get the same raise. Edward E. Lawler, founder and director the University of Southern California’s Center for Effective Organizations stated, “The difference in merit pay between the outstanding performers and poor performers is so small that there’s no incentive value at all” (Lawler as quoted by Gray, 2002, p. 16).

In Gray’s (2002) opinion the second reason why performance appraisals do not work are because employees do not views themselves are average. However, when an organization is administering a merit raise based on the performance appraisal, it becomes cost prohibitive to score all employees at the high end. So basically the system is set up to have most employees

rated as average on performance appraisals. He added that it is ironic that the mission statement of most organizations is to excel, but they want to do it with average employees (Gray, 2002).

Eric Britten (2011), a management consultant in Anchorage, Alaska, conducted an internet search by typing “why does everyone hate performance reviews” into a search engine. He received nearly seven million results. He believes the reason they are viewed with such disdain is because organizations do not take them seriously. Organizations that have performance appraisals must have two components established. First, the appraisal process must be comprised of sound performance planning. This begins with the development of the appraisal, the objectives of the performance plan, and the buy-in of the entire organization. The culture needs to change, and the organization must provide the employees the required competencies and expectations for their jobs. The second component, Britten (2011) argues, is the need for training. Having the best possible performance appraisal system in place, even with the support of the employees, if the evaluators are not skilled and proficient, the entire process will fail (Britten, 2011).

Having an inadequate appraisal system and lack of training are the two main reasons performance appraisals are ineffective (Willing, 2010). For the appraisal process to work, the system must be correct for the organization. In most organizations the process is broad and just too subjective (Stein, 2006). This is exactly the case with the MBFD appraisals. They are subjective, and so broad they cover every job within the City. The appraisals need to be measured by set standards, such as those from the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) or department policies, and cannot be made solely on the evaluators opinion, specific examples of how the performance is measured is required (Hosea, 2004).

A recurrent theme discovered while conducting the research was that in order for the appraisals to work effectively, they need to be job specific, and related to the job description. There is a separate job description for each position within the MBFD, and the job description outlines the requisite skills, knowledge, and abilities. A job description serves as a foundation for the skills of the position, and what tasks are associated with it, thus making the job description a vital element of appraising an employee's performance (Juneau, 2006). By having the appraisal based on each job description and measured by the same standards, it creates continuity and increases the effectiveness and thoroughness of the appraisals (Carter & Rausch, 2008).

The City's performance appraisals are job related in a literal sense of the term. For example, one category on the performance appraisal is appearance. It is loosely job related, as every employee must maintain some form of appearance. However, the definition and interpretation of appearance becomes problematic. Appearance certainly means something different for a lifeguard that wears a swimsuit, towel and flip-flops, a sanitation worker that is collecting refuse in the heat, an officer worker in a business setting, and a firefighter responding to emergency incidents. The public expectation for each is different, yet the City's expectation for scoring on the appraisal form is the same. This category is job related, but it is not job specific, thus not effectively evaluating performance.

For this reason there are legal concerns when a broad appraisal is used throughout the entire organization. It is difficult for one catch-all form to be effective in evaluating all employees when it is not specific to the individual job. The *Encyclopedia of Small Business* (2011), lists that ensuring the performance measures are related to the actual job as a key legal point surrounding performance appraisals (p. 462). The courts have also ruled against trait based

appraisals because there is no standard way of appraising, and it is nearly impossible to eliminate the subjectivity. In 1974, the courts ruled in *Kirkland v. New York Department of Correctional Services*, that if an analysis of the job has not been conducted, and there are no standards to define what traits are necessary for successful job performance, the appraisal is not valid (Latham & Wexley, 1982). Also In the 1974, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Griggs v. Duke Power*, that any and all employment criteria that had an adverse affect on a class member must be shown to be job related. In this case the court ruled that promotional exams are permitted by an employer as long as they are job related. Therefore, when performance appraisals are required as criteria for employment, promotion, pay, etc., they must be job related in order to be valid (Latham & Wexley, 1982).

Many supervisors are uncomfortable when conducting performance appraisals. Supervisors are human, and most do not like to give bad news or to be critical of someone (Thomas, 2007). One reason is because they have lack of skill and have not been trained (Stein, 2006). When speaking with Coleman Randall, he stated that when the City was using the MBO appraisals in the 1980's there were fire department officers unable to complete them proficiently (C. H. Randall, personal communication, May 6, 2011). This could be because they lacked the formal education or cognitive abilities, or because the organization did not provide enough training.

A lack of training can be a downfall no matter how good the process is. The MBFD does not have a set training program for newly promoted supervisors, nor is there any refresher training for supervisors. The MBFD is not the only City department that does not have formal training for its supervisors. After speaking with Pam Stone, recreation division head with the Cultural and Leisure Services Department, she stated her department does not provide supervisor

training. She added that supervisors are required to take the City sponsored Effective Supervisory class, and there is performance appraisal training in the class (P. Stone, personal communication, May 6, 2011). The textbook used in the class is 217 pages, with only nine pages dedicated to performance appraisals (International City/County Management Association, 2005, pp. 76-84).

In regards to the importance of training, Edward Lawler states the organization “must invest a considerable amount of time in training appraisers” (Lawler, 1994, p. 29). Due to lack of training, supervisors may not be aware of some common errors and pitfalls when completing performance appraisals. Leniency error is when an evaluator either overstates or understates an employee’s actions. Overstating is positive leniency and results in a rating that is inflated, and negative leniency is understating performance resulting in a rating that is too low. The problem lies with the evaluator and which way they lean, as one employee would get two completely different scores from a positive and a negative leniency supervisor (De Cenzo & Robbins, 2001). The argument can also be made that the employee’s scores are actually a reflection of the evaluator’s demeanor, not their performance (Willing, 2010).

The halo effect is the belief that if an employee is good or bad at one thing, they must be good or bad at everything. For example, if an employee is extremely friendly and always says good morning, the halo effect means the evaluator will score the employee higher based on the belief that since the employee is friendly, they must be a hard worker and knowledgeable (De Cenzo & Robbins, 2001).

Similarity error occurs when an evaluator rates an employee a certain way because the employee possesses a similar trait as the evaluator. Central tendency occurs when the evaluators avoid the highest scores, but they also avoid the lowest scores as well, usually settling for a score

in the middle, something average (De Cenzo & Robbins, 2001). And the final common error, which occurs all too often, is the recency error. Since the human memory amplifies the most recent events, the employee is rated on the events that happened recently, instead of taking into account all of the events over the entire appraisal period (Fetzer, 2008).

Since the traditional appraisals seem to carry such a negative overtone, a new paradigm is evolving to improve the way an employee's performance is appraised. The 360-degree multi-rater assessment has been gaining popularity in the business world, with an estimated 90% of Fortune 500 companies using them (Maylett, & Riboldi, 2007, p. 50). With this type of assessment vehicle, everyone the employee comes in contact with is asked to provide anonymous feedback. For example, a lieutenant would be appraised by his supervisor, fellow lieutenants, subordinates, and even citizens (Swinhart, 2008).

The pros to the 360-degree assessment, if it is completed honestly, are that the employee gets a true measure of how others see them from a variety of sources. It provides insightful and useful information that the employee can use to make improvements (Drakes, 2008). The 360-degree assessment not only tells an employee where they stand, but can be a predictor of future performance.

Maylett and Riboldi (2007) discuss the findings of a study done by CHG Healthcare. CHG Healthcare is a national healthcare staffing firm that has been in business since 1979 and places doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professional in temporary and permanent locations. CHG began using the 360-degree assessments to appraise their employee's strengths and weaknesses. After administering these assessments, they found that the results not only illustrated the employee's past behavior, but was a predictor of future behavior. CHG also found the employee's with better 360-degree assessment scores were more engaged with their work

which resulted in less absenteeism, more productivity, and better customer service. It also revealed that managers with good job performance scores, but low 360-degree assessment scores, were performing worse a year later (Maylett, & Riboldi, 2007).

Conversely, there is research that has shown when 360-degree assessments are used together with performance appraisals, the results tend to be more lenient and less reliable (“360-Degree Appraisals ‘No Improvement’,” 2007). Opponents also argue that if the assessments are being done by friends or peers, they are not objective and thus they are not accurate (Maylett, & Riboldi, 2007) and they may turn into a popularity contest (Solie, 2002). The final drawback is the cost. To get the assessment done correctly they must be developed professionally (Messmer & Bogardus, 2008) which may entail great costs.

#### Procedures

The descriptive research method dictated the procedures to be used in this applied research project. After developing the research questions, the other methods used included a thorough literature review, surveying current employees of the MBFD, surveying other fire departments about their process for conducting annual performance appraisals, surveying current City of Myrtle Beach department heads, conducting personal interviews and discussions with certain City of Myrtle Beach department heads, speaking with employees outside of the fire service on how they conduct performance appraisals, and personal insight and knowledge regarding the MBFD performance appraisal process.

The initial literature research began in Emmitsburg, Maryland in January 2011 while attending the Executive Development course. Research was conducted on performance appraisals within the fire service at the Learning Research Center (LRC). Further research was conducted via online searches through Yahoo, Google, and Google Scholar. Additional research

was conducted at Kimbel Library at Coastal Carolina University located in Conway, South Carolina, as well as at Chapin Memorial Library in Myrtle Beach. After gathering this information, further expansion of the topic was necessary. The research was further expanded to include the private sector and professional journal articles that were authored by individuals outside of the fire service.

To truly find out if the MBFD appraisal system is effective for employees, getting the views of the employees that receive them is imperative. The “ARP Survey for MBFD Employees and Supervisors” was created (see Appendix A). It was based off of the perceived issues within the appraisal system and to gain answers to research questions 1, 2, and 3. Each question had a predetermined link to one of the first three research questions, however the participants were unaware of the connection. To ensure privacy, each employee was provided with a hard copy form with boxes to mark, rather than using an electronic survey. This was used to alleviate worries about losing anonymity on City computers. The survey consisted of twenty-one questions for all employees, and an additional thirteen questions given to supervisors. The surveys were a forced choice response format, meaning only one response could be given for each question.

The surveys were distributed during monthly medical in-service training. All employees must attend this in-service training, which made getting the participation rate near 100%. The training is conducted three times per shift, for a total of nine times per month. Employees were asked to complete the survey at that time, and they were collected in a random manner. In all, 137 surveys were distributed and collected. The fire chief, part-time mechanic, and newly hired full-time mechanic were not given surveys. Also, two employees on medical leave did not receive the surveys. The department was also conducting a recruit school to fill eleven vacant

positions, and the recruits were not given the survey. Therefore, of the 142 employees eligible to participate in the survey, only five did not, making the participation rate 97%.

The next tool necessary was to get the views of department heads from the City of Myrtle Beach. “The Executive Fire Officer Survey for City of Myrtle Beach Department Heads” was created online using [zoomerang.com](http://zoomerang.com) (see Appendix B). Zoomerang is an online survey website that allows surveys to be built, results to be tabulated, and ensures the privacy and anonymity of the respondents. The purpose of this survey was to attain the City’s senior management’s view of the current performance appraisal system, and to analyze it with that of the MBFD employees. This twelve question survey was e-mailed to the sixteen department heads.

After completing the surveys, it was important to further detail how other departments within the City of Myrtle Beach conduct their appraisals in comparison to the fire department. This author first spoke with Coleman Randall, the City’s Human Resource Director, about the history of the appraisal system. After the conversation with Mr. Randall, the Police Department and Cultural and Leisure Services Department were selected to conduct further analysis. Both departments are large just like the MBFD, and both departments have a wide array of positions with various roles and responsibilities. I attempted to speak with the police chief, however he was unavailable and I was directed to Captain Kevin Heins, division head of uniformed patrol. I asked him several questions, and basically had a discussion about their process.

The Cultural and Leisure Services Department, formerly known as Parks and Recreation, does not currently have a department head after the former department head retired in December, 2010. There are two division heads that lead each division within the department, and they both report to an assistant city manager. Pam Stone, a long time division head that manages the

recreation division was willing to answer questions and have a discussion about how the department conducts performance appraisals.

After gathering the information from inside the City, more research was needed to analyze how other fire departments did performance appraisals. The “Executive Fire Officer Survey of Fire Department Appraisal Systems” survey was created, again using zoomerang.com (see Appendix C). Three states were chosen to be used in the survey: South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia. About two-thirds of the departments were in South Carolina, but this author believed it was important to get feedback from other states as well. The two other states were chosen for their close geographic proximity and similar demographics in the fire service to South Carolina. Also, all three states are right to work states, with no binding collective bargaining. The departments used were from all over the states, ranging from the coast, to central areas, and to mountainous regions, and also popular tourist destinations. For a full list of the departments, refer to Appendix D. The departments that received the survey were of all sizes from the less than fifty employees, to more than two hundred. They were made up of either all career, or combination departments. The e-mails were sent to ninety-four fire chiefs asking them, or one of their key chief officers with knowledge regarding their appraisal process to complete the survey in a timely manner.

After reviewing what happens within the City and other fire departments, it was determined that further expansion was warranted on the topic away from local government. Two organizations that operate in the private sector were selected. Grand Strand Regional Medical Center, a proprietary healthcare facility located in Myrtle Beach was chosen because of its vast array of jobs from accountant, to registered nurse, to housekeeper. Lisa Piatt, RN, BSN, is the unit manager of the Medical Intensive Care Unit (MICU) and agreed to be interviewed.

The second organization selected was Bank of New York Mellon. This is a large corporation that is completely outside of the realm of the fire service and local government. Finding an organization like this seemed appropriate in gaining valuable insight away from the fire service. Scott Kondratik is a project manager with nearly twenty years experience with Mellon. He agreed to answer questions and provide insight to Mellon's employee appraisal process.

There were some limitations to the research methods. There was 97% participation on the employee surveys which was pleasing. However, one limitation was not all participants answered every question. There were surveys submitted with questions left blank, and there were supervisors that did not complete the supervisory section. There were also areas where participants checked both answers, or wrote in a non-provided answer. In both of these cases the answers were not counted.

The limitation for the surveys sent to the department heads was the 50% participation rate. This participation rate was frustrating. As a long time City employee and high ranking officer within the MBFD, this author was hoping that all department heads would not only assist a fellow employee, but also provide insight in an attempt to improve the appraisal process within the MBFD. With only half of the department heads completing the survey, it raises the question as to why they did not participate. Did they simply forget, or is there a reason why they will not give feedback regarding the appraisals? After the e-mail that contained the survey request was sent to the department heads, this author received one reply stating that the individual would not complete it because they did not feel they could offer their opinion on an administrative procedure that was already approved by the city manager.

Limiting the surveys sent to the other fire departments was the participation rate of about 46% and the fact that not all participants answered all of the questions. Another limitation was not knowing who actually completed the survey. The surveys were sent to the fire chiefs asking them to complete it, or one of their key chief officers with knowledge about their performance appraisal process. Unfortunately, there was no way of knowing who actually completed the survey.

The limitation for the interviews of the organizations outside of the fires service is the fact that only two interviews were conducted and there was not a large section of organizations chosen. However, the purpose of interviewing only two individuals from outside of local government was to gain a small amount of insight to the private sector's way of conducting performance appraisals that could be beneficial. The theory was to just scratch the surface, not explore the topic in great depth.

## Results

Through the various research methods, the following results were discovered.

How do fire department supervisors and employees perceive the current employee appraisal system? The results were gathered by the employee survey using questions 1, 6, 10, 13, 14, 15, S3, S4, S8, and S11. See Appendix E.

Over half of the participants perceive the current system as not effectively evaluating their performance. Nearly two-thirds of the employees do not believe there is a standard appraisal system for all employees, it is not a positive experience, and the system provides them no benefit. Only 11% of the MBFD employees view the current appraisal process as above average or excellent, and nearly three-quarters of them believe it is too subjective. There appears to be a perceived lack of commitment in the supervisors as slightly over half of the employees

believe their supervisor avoids rating an employee as superior because it requires extra work for the supervisor by having to write a letter of support to accompany the appraisal.

The officers overwhelmingly agree to the fact that the current appraisal system needs revamping. Two out of every three officers are influenced by a higher ranking officer when completing appraisals. Since the higher ranking officer does not directly supervise the employee daily, this may affect the employee's appraisal. Only a quarter of the officers inflate scores of personable employees regardless of their performance which illustrates they do not fall into the halo effect. Unfortunately, over half of the officers believe that an overall score that warrants a 2% merit increase is "meets expectations." This finding is quite troubling because the rating for a 2% is "exceeds expectations," and if the supervisors view a 2% as average, the overall scores may be artificially inflated.

What are the current issues affecting employee performance appraisals in the MBFD? The results were gathered from the employee survey using questions 2, 3, 4, 8, 11, 20, S5, S6, and S10, personal communications, and the literature research findings. See Appendix F.

According to the results, employees believe overwhelmingly that their supervisor has given them the expectations to improve and explained how the appraisal process works. This is a very uplifting finding to know the supervisors are giving employees development plans and educating them on the overall process so there are no surprises. However, standardization in scoring appears to be lacking as 60% believe their scores would be different if their appraisal was done by two different officers. The lack of standardization illustrates the importance of using a more objective appraisal in order to remove the subjectivity so employees would have a more definitive idea of where they stand.

Just over half of the employees believe their appraisals were changed by someone that does not directly supervise them, which correlates earlier to the supervisor's claims they were influenced by a ranking officer to score an employee a certain way. About half of the employees compare their appraisals with others, which may be problematic as similar performing employees may get totally different results, which will increase the employee's claims of a lack of standardization. When asked if supervisors score their perceived friends higher than people they do not, 71% believe they do, which again brings into question the employees overall faith in the system and in the officers.

Seven out of ten officers find it difficult to find something useful to write in veteran's appraisals, and 55% believe the current appraisal form is hard to use. Finally, two-thirds of the officers do their job by addressing minor issues regardless of whether or not harmony will be lost in the firehouse.

Other issues that affect the current appraisal system that were discovered while conducting the research are related to the type of appraisal that is used. The current trait based system is adversely affecting the performance appraisals, and the validity of this type of appraisal is often questioned. This also creates the lack of standardization that is apparent to the employees, and hurting the appraisals. There is case law stating that appraisals should be job related. When asked, Coleman Randall (2011) stated the current appraisal is old and needs to be updated. He adds that there have been inquiries over the years about changing the appraisals, and he hopes when the change does occur, there will be possibly four different forms for various departments such as public safety, public works, administration, and management (C.H. Randall, personal communication, May 6, 2011).

How can the MBFD increase the value and effectiveness of employee performance appraisals? The results were gathered from the employee survey using questions 5, 7, 9, 12, 16, 17, and 19, personal communications, and the literature research findings. See Appendix G.

It is often said that money is not a motivator, but these results show otherwise as 82% of employees would be motivated to work harder if more money was tied to the performance appraisal. Over two-thirds believe the appraisals should carry more weight within the promotional process. This result was interesting, as earlier results reveal that the employees do not believe the system effectively evaluates their performance, however they want the appraisals to carry more weight with the promotional process.

Almost all employees, 97%, believe every job should have a specific performance appraisal which decisively shows the employees want a change. Less than half believe the current system provides them good guidance for the future. The employees would like to complete a 360-degree assessment as two-thirds of them would find is beneficial to get feedback from colleagues during the appraisal, and 85% would like to provide feedback on their supervisor's job performance during their appraisal. The supervisors provide 85% of their employees with usable feedback during the performance appraisal, even though earlier results reveal that under half believe the system provides good guidance for the future. The supervisors meet with the employees during the appraisal period, as 53% say they get feedback regarding their performance throughout the year.

Only 40% of the supervisors say they received training on conducting performance appraisals prior to doing their first. Even less, only 17%, have received refresher training within the past two years. The supervisors want to hear from their employees and would like to get feedback from them during their appraisals. Again, the 360-degree assessment appears to be

welcomed by the supervisors, just like the employees. Almost unanimously, 97%, the supervisors have a set method for completing all of their appraisals. The supervisors are putting time and thought into the appraisals, as three or more hours are needed for 80% of the supervisors to complete a performance appraisal. Another contrasting finding with that of the employees is all of the supervisors say they meet with their employees throughout the year, with a majority doing it every six months. However, only 53% of the employees stated they received feedback throughout the year. This calls into question what actually happens throughout the year. If the officers are indeed conducting performance meetings throughout the year, the communication is lacking since about half of the employees do not seem to be getting the message.

Fire Chief Alvin Payne was not given an employee survey to complete, but it was important to get his opinion on how to improve the effectiveness of the current appraisal process. The overall goal of the MBFD for conducting performance appraisals is to “define and design a progression program to ensure employees do their job effectively and grow into higher ranking positions” (J. A. Payne, personal communication, May 6, 2011). He continued by stating he would prefer to emphasize what is related to the fire department, and prioritize categories that are important to a firefighter such as job knowledge, safety, and decision making (J. A. Payne, personal communication, May 6, 2011).

A way to increase the effectiveness is to provide the supervisors with training on performance appraisals, which the results illustrate is lacking. The literature discusses how a performance appraisal system, no matter how good, can be destroyed if the supervisors are not trained. Also, having set performance feedback meetings will aid in guiding the employees as well as utilizing some form of a 360-degree assessment tool. Finally, having appraisals that are

specific to the jobs performed in the fire department and specific measurements for them would aid in increasing the overall effectiveness and value of the appraisals.

How do other departments within the City of Myrtle Beach conduct employee performance appraisals, and does the current system meet their needs? The results below were gathered from the “Executive Fire Officer Survey for City of Myrtle Beach Department Heads” that was sent to the sixteen department heads as well personal communications. See Appendix H.

Half of the participants believe the City should have separate performance appraisals for each position, which is a disconnect from the employee’s overwhelming view of having specific job appraisals. Half of the department’s provide formal training to their supervisors before conducting their first performance appraisal which is higher the fire department’s results. Only one participant’s department requires employees to submit a self-assessment to their supervisor prior to their annual performance appraisal. Nearly two-thirds of the participants said their department has established guidelines to ensure standardization and half meet with their employees throughout the year when the situation arises or it is needed. Three-quarters of the participants responded that their department has no set way of scoring that again illustrates a lack of standardization and continuity throughout the entire City. All of the participants used the performance appraisal in the promotions process. The appraisal forms are easy for 88% of the participants to use, which is in contrast to the results of the MBFD supervisors. Less than half, 47%, would like to establish a performance appraisal for their department if they were given the opportunity. In complete disagreement with the employee and supervisor responses, all of the department head participants are against employees providing feedback to each other during the

appraisal. Finally, half of the participants rated the City's appraisal system as average, with 25% rating it as both above and below average.

When answering question #12 about what changes would be made to the current system, one participant would prefer the City to switch to a different format for only certain categories of employees and classifications, but not necessarily a separate appraisal for each and every classification. Three participants would change the system to be specific for each job and discontinue one appraisal for the entire City. Another participant would change five categories to be specific to each department in lieu of changing the entire format, while another would like the employee goals to be directly related to the City's goals listed within the comprehensive plan. The final participant stated, "With our current system, scores do not match descriptions. While we want our employees to strive for excellence and exceed expectations, an employee who meets expectations receives a 1% increase which has to be approved by City Manager. This employee may be demoted or placed on an extended probationary period until performance improves yet they meet current job expectations."

When asked what the purpose of doing performance appraisals was, Mr. Randall replied, "To communicate with employees and let them know where they stand" (C.H. Randall, personal communication, May 6, 2011). He added the performance appraisals were also used for legal documentation of an employee's actions and used in cases where a reduction is force it necessary. When asked how the City ensures that the City-wide appraisals are administered the same, he stated there is no mandate on how they are completed, it is all department specific (C.H. Randall, personal communication, May 6, 2011).

Captain Kevin Heins offered insight as to how the police department conducts their appraisals. He first stated that the appraisal must be "filled with examples" (K. Heins, personal

communication, May 6, 2011). For example, in the quality of work section there must be at least five quality control points. These quality control points are attained by talking to individuals the employee had contact with over the appraisal period, and getting their specific comments. These contacts may not always be accurate because it could be a person the employee arrested, so it is not a flawless system. Captain Heins added that the appraisals are experienced based. He used an example of a first year employee, stating there is no way they could get a five in the job knowledge category (K. Heins, personal communication, May 6, 2011).

When asked how the department ensures that everyone is appraised the same, he stated that was impossible, and that there was going to be subjectivity. He added that the department has no standard guide for consistency because the City does not have one. The primary purpose of the appraisals for the police department is, “to let the officer know their standing for the year” (K. Heins, personal communication, May 6, 2011). Finally, through the appraisal process every supervisor within the employee’s chain of command is required to comment in the appraisal. This means a patrol officer will have the corporal, sergeant, lieutenant, and captain make comments in the appraisal. The police chief comments on all appraisals, and has the final say regarding the overall score (K. Heins, personal communication, May 6, 2011).

From the Cultural and Leisure Services Department, Pam Stone stated the purpose of the evaluations is, “To build up employees, not tear them down” (P. Stone, personal communication, May 6, 2011). She added that the department has no standard to follow when conducting appraisals that will ensure consistency, and that it is difficult to do the appraisals since there are multiple jobs within the department, but everyone is required to use the same appraisal tool. Supervisors are not given formal training on appraisals. However, all supervisors do attend the

Effective Supervisory training class sponsored by the City, which does have a section on appraisals (P. Stone, personal communication, May 6, 2011).

The results show that all City departments have different ways of conducting the same annual performance appraisal. There is no set standard across the departments, except for the fact all of the participant's departments use the appraisals in their respective promotional process. The police department appears to be the most thorough. Overall, the appraisals receive an average rating, with room for improvement.

How do other fire departments conduct employee performance appraisals? The results are based on answers from the survey sent to ninety-four fire departments throughout South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia and from personal communications from employees outside of the fire service. See Appendix I.

Nearly all of the departments surveyed conduct annual performance appraisals. This was not surprising, however what was surprising was there was one department that did not. Two-thirds of the participating departments were all career departments, and 59% of the participants have less than one hundred employees. The majority of the departments, 82%, have updated their performance appraisals within the last five years. Nearly two-thirds of the departments are rewarded with either a merit salary increase or a one-time merit bonus which was an expected result. The performance appraisals are used in the promotional process in 77% of the departments, while 60% of departments provide formal training to newly promoted supervisors before completing their first appraisal. Again, the amount of training is higher than that of MBFD, but it is still shocking the number of supervisors that are doing appraisals without proper training.

Only 33% of the departments utilize an appraisal that is job specific, the rest are generic and used throughout the entire organization. This results falls in line with the literature stating it is popular and easier to have one generic form. When other employees besides the employee's supervisor are involved in the appraisal process, 71% are officers above the supervisor's rank, and in 62% of the departments the fire chief is involved. This, too, falls in line with the perception of the MBFD employees and officers about being influenced by others when doing an appraisal. Most departments have guidelines to ensure everyone is rated the same way, and 79% believe the appraisal form is easy to use. Fifty-eight per cent of the departments that responded rated their appraisals as average, while 14% rated it above average or excellent.

Lisa Piatt, unit manager of the MICU at Grand Strand Regional Medical Center (GSRMC), stated the purpose of their performance appraisals is to, "Make sure everyone is doing their job. That they are capable, and meeting the standard" (L. P. Piatt, personal communication, June 8, 2011). The appraisal process at GSRMC is that everyone receives their annual performance appraisal in March. Ms. Piatt believes this is easier for her, and better for the employee. The appraisal forms are task based with numeric values given for how well or how poorly the employee does the task. There are different forms for each job description. Therefore, a registered nurse is appraised differently than a respiratory therapist. She did state that overall they are effective most of the time. However with employees that have been there a long time, she sometimes has more difficulty scoring them. This is a similar finding to that of the MBFD supervisors. She adds about the appraisals in general, "It's never a win-win, someone's always going to be dissatisfied" (L. P. Piatt, personal communication, June 8, 2011).

When asked what she would change if she could, she stated that different categories would be weighted differently. Also, she would reinstitute performance pay. In the past the

employee's raise was based on their overall score, so the higher the score, the larger the raise.

This year, however, everyone received a 2% raise, so there was no incentive to work harder (L.

P. Piatt, personal communication, June 8, 2011).

Project Manager Scott Kondratik with the Bank of New York Mellon Corporation stated every employee is appraised in February. The appraisal is comprised of three parts, Global Goals, Corporate Goal, and Employee Goals. The first two goals are the same for everyone throughout the corporation, but the employee goals are specific to each worker. Every employee creates three to five employee goals with the supervisor that are results based. Six months into the appraisal period, the employee will provide feedback to the supervisor on what they are doing to meet the goals. The six-month meeting is optional, and varies from department to department. At the end of the appraisal period, the employee will detail in writing, how they met each goal in all three categories. The supervisor will do the same, and give a numeric rating of five to one, with five being the highest and one the lowest. Based on the overall score, the supervisor will assign the employee a merit bonus (S. M. Kondratik, personal communication, June 8, 2011).

Mr. Kondratik does not believe this appraisal system is effective. He said of the reward system, "There is no set bonus for your overall score, absolutely no continuity" (S. M. Kondratik, personal communication, June 8, 2011). He said since the employees are required to input their actions at the end of the appraisal, and sometime at midyear, it is too time consuming for little value. He believes the system should be changed by making it shorter and having more of a reward such as larger bonuses or more time off (S. M. Kondratik, personal communication, June 8, 2011).

The MBFD is quite similar to the participating fire departments when it comes to conducting performance appraisals. Majority of fire departments use a generic form like the MBFD, however both private sector organizations have at least a portion that is specific to the employee's position. Most departments use them in their promotional process as well, and most appear to be lacking when it comes to training. Other officers are involved in the appraisal and nearly all of the departments have merit pay associated with the appraisals, as do both of the private sector organizations. The main differences are the participants hold their appraisals in higher regard than MBFD employees, and that the participant's appraisals have been updated more recently.

#### Discussion

The lack of training shown in the results of the study is disheartening. It is difficult to fathom what the reasons are why supervisors are not given training in conducting performance appraisals. This lack of training is setting up the entire process for failure. The MBFD would not send a new firefighter into a burning house without training. However, that is exactly what is occurring to over half of newly promoted officers according to the results. And this error is not limited to the MBFD or fire service alone. The results show the same for the other departments within the City of Myrtle Beach. Grand Strand Regional Medical Center does not provide training to their newly promoted unit managers either (L. P. Piatt, personal communication, June 8, 2011).

In order to begin improving the appraisal process, the MBFD must implement training for the supervisors regularly. "Most supervisors are not naturally good at performance appraisal" (Lawler, 1994, p. 25). They cannot be expected to know how to do an appraisal if they have not received the information on how to do it. Without training, they will revert to using their past

experiences and just “winging it” (Willing, 2010, p. 115). Simply put, without the training any other changes will be a mute point because the system will fail (Britten, 2011).

A lack of consistency or standardization is a consequence of the lack of training (Stein, 2006). Without the department relaying to the officer what the standards are, the officers have no way of knowing what the appropriate measurement standards are. From the results, 60% of employees believe their scores would be different if their appraisal was done by two different officers. Basically all of the supervisors have a set method for completing all of their appraisals. However, even though each supervisor has their own personal way of doing the appraisal, each supervisor’s method varies from one another according to the employee’s view. This certainly illustrates a lack of standardization. It is important to have a standard for measurement that everyone is aware of (Graham, n.d.). A further illustration of this point is the fact Ms. Stone, Captain Heins, and Chief Payne all have different departmental purposes for conducting performance appraisals (P. Stone, K. Heins, & J. A. Payne, personal communication, May 6, 2011). So there is definitely a lack of continuity resulting from the lack of training.

The type of appraisal used by the MBFD also lends itself to poor standardization. The current performance appraisal is based on the employee’s traits and some certain behaviors using a numeric rating, with the supervisors required to add comments into each category. These types of performance appraisals are very popular, but not always effective (Bacal, 2004). And as Bacal (2004) stated, their usefulness can range between “absolutely atrocious to fair” (p. 58).

One of the downfalls with this system is there is simply no way to create and guarantee consistency. Every supervisor has a different opinion of what each item and category means, yet they still are required to provide a numeric score in each category. Rating someone’s performance over the course of a year by adding up numbers that have been scored with no set

objective basis, and can vary from officer to officer, greatly diminishes what the employee is not getting from it (Bacal, 2004). Since the supervisors are required to write comments regarding the employee's performance in each category, the comments are actually what provides value and guidance to the employee. Most employees are not going to get much from the end number, but the supervisor's comments actually provide the information regarding the employee's performance and ways to improve. So the comments are the means to improve and show what the employee has done over the year, but the end number is what is used to determine the employee's raise. This points to updating the process and the importance of using a more objective, job related appraisal to remove the subjectivity. In this way employees would have a more definitive idea of where they stand.

The employees and officers in the MBFD want a job specific appraisal. However, only half of the department heads believe a job specific appraisal is needed. The basis for a job specific appraisal is the job description (Juneau, 2006). There are job descriptions for every position within the MBFD that outline the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities for the position. To effectively evaluate an employee's job performance, the appraisal should be geared towards the jobs they do (Juneau, 2006). To truly effectively evaluate a firefighter's performance, they must be evaluated as a firefighter which requires a different appraisal than the one everyone else gets. From the results, the employees believe this, but not all the department heads agree.

Exactly half of the employees in the emergency services division have five years or less on the job. These firefighters need a job specific appraisal so they can know where they stand, and what skills they need to enhance. By having a specific, task based and job related appraisal, the employee can actually see what they did well and not so well. If the knowledge of work

section had performance measures from NFPA or local requirements, there would be no debate as to the objectiveness of the rating, unlike the current system where an arbitrary number is given to try and parallel the supervisor's comments. The current system has been in place for over eighteen years with only minor changes ten years ago. It appears the system is outdated, and needs to be revisited.

Although no literature was found explaining how often appraisals should be updated, the results indicate there is a correlation between how recent the appraisal was updated, and the overall satisfaction of the appraisal. The majority of the fire departments surveyed have updated their performance appraisals within the last five years. This is a critical element as it points out the importance of staying current. If performance appraisals are to be taken seriously the organization must be committed to them (Stein, 2006). And staying current sends a good message that performance is important and warrants review every few years to avoid stagnation.

Fifty-eight per cent of the departments that responded in the survey rated their appraisals as average, while 14% rated it above average or excellent. The data also shows that 82% of departments have updated their appraisals within five years. This is in stark contrast to the employees of MBFD as half rated the appraisal below average or poor, and the appraisals used by the MBFD are old and only minimally updated ten years ago. This indicates that the more current the appraisal, the higher the user satisfaction.

The MBFD is at a disadvantage in terms of being able to update the appraisal since it is required to use the appraisal provided by the City. Chief Payne is a proponent of a more job related appraisal for the MBFD (J. A. Payne, personal communication, May 6, 2011), but when the department head survey respondents were asked if they would create an appraisal for their own department if they could, 43% of them replied that they would not. With the age of the

current appraisal, it is interesting as to why this 43% would not want to update it. Even if they are completely satisfied with the current system, which the results indicate 75% of them view the system as average or worse, why would they not want to try and improve the process. This appears to be an unwillingness to change and keep the status quo.

When looking to update the system, a 360-degree assessment component might help increase the effectiveness. A 360-degree instrument is used in the fire service to help improve the organization by helping the employees grow professionally and as a person. But they also give employees a different view of themselves (Swinhart, 2008). It allows the employee to get feedback from various positions, and this feedback allows the employee to take a step back and go to the balcony. Going to the balcony, as described by Heifetz and Linsky (2002), is stepping back and being able to look at the entire picture to see and digest what is actually going on.

The results indicate a desire of the employees to be evaluated by their peers, and to evaluate their supervisors. The supervisors also appear willing to allow their subordinates to provide them feedback showing a respect for their employee's opinions of them. This can open a good line of communication, and build a strong working relationship based on mutual respect.

But in complete disagreement with the employee and supervisor responses, all of the department head participants are against employees providing feedback to each other during the appraisal. With the amount of Fortune 500 companies using them (Maylett, & Riboldi, 2007), there is a great deal of support for these types of assessments. This shows the participants are either unfamiliar with them, or something has happened to cause them to view them unfavorably.

### Recommendations

The purpose of this research is to identify an effective employee appraisal process for the Myrtle Beach Fire Department. After analyzing the various studies and the available research,

there are several items that need to be incorporated to improve the overall appraisal process for the MBFD. The first is to create an annual performance appraisal policy which will outline the department's purpose for the appraisal. It will also describe how the appraisals are used for promotional processes, how the ratings will be determined, and how to complete the appraisal form.

The MBFD then needs to create its own appraisal that is specific to the individual jobs performed by fire department personnel. The new appraisals will be comprised of three separate sections. The first section will be based on the employee's job performance, and will be specific to each position. This will consist of a performance based, objective job measure check sheet that a supervisor can use to document the employee's actions and performance. The performance measures can be taken from the NFPA standards for firefighter I and II, driver-operator, and fire officer. This will measure how well or how poorly an employee performs their job.

The second section will be comprised of essay style questions for the supervisor to write about the employee. This will provide the supervisor a chance to offer firm data and examples of the employee's actions over the appraisal period. For example, the questions can be:

1. How has the employee grown or developed during this appraisal period?
2. Describe the employee's achievements, strengths and weakness.
3. What has the employee done to achieve their goals and objectives?
4. Give examples of the employee's professionalism?

The final ingredient in the appraisal process would be some type of 360-degree assessment component. Adding the 360-degree assessment would provide employees and

supervisors invaluable feedback about themselves from a completely different perspective than what they are used to.

After the appraisal is created, everyone needs to be trained on the new process. Employees need to know what they are being appraised on and how it works, and everyone needs to understand the policy and process. Supervisors need to know how to appraise the employees and what performance measures are being used to ensure a standard is met across the department. Supervisors also need basic training on performance appraisals in general, such as the common mistakes, importance of documentation, and how to use the form.

After the new policy and appraisals are developed and training is conducted, the overall process will begin. The supervisor will be more involved and take a proactive approach in aiding the employee's ability to reach their performance goals. This will begin with the appraisal meeting when the supervisor gives the employee the appraisal for the previous year. At that time, the goals are set for the upcoming appraisal period. Together, the employee and supervisor will create a roadmap to success by jointly establishing career and developmental goals for the year and how they will be measured.

Throughout the year, the supervisor will provide feedback to the employee, and get feedback from the employee about the progress and where the employee stands. This shall be done whenever the supervisor believes it is needed, but at least once every quarter. Halfway through the appraisal period, the employee and supervisor will meet for an interim appraisal. This is an unofficial appraisal of where the employee is halfway through the appraisal period to address how things are going up to that point, and what actions are needed to change. By meeting with the employees in a formal way, there should be no surprises when the final appraisal is conducted, and it allows the employee to make changes if they are necessary. At the

interim appraisal meeting, the supervisor will also give the employee written documentation of the employee's performance.

The final item required is to improve the reward system. The current appraisal reward is given as either a 1%, 2%, or 3% salary increase. The top increase should be increased by 0.6% and the raises related to the final score. Therefore a perfect score would be a 3.6% raise, and a 0.1% reduction for every point less. The current issue is when an employee scores at the top of a range, the increase is the same as the employee that scored the bottom for that range. In the updated version, a final score at the top of the "exceed expectations" range would be a 2.9% increase, as opposed to the current increase of 2%. And a score at the bottom of the "exceeds expectations" range that would be a 2% increase. Since the range has a ten point spread, the raises will be adjusted accordingly in between. This would be a way to reward employees that outperform other employees. See Table 1.

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Table 1

*Merit Increases by Classification Range*

Final Score Rating	Points in Range	Merit Increase
Substantially exceeds expectations	7	3% to 3.6%
Exceeds expectations	10	2% to 2.9%
Meets expectations	10	1% to 1.9%

---

By enacting these recommendations, the MBFD can create a complete performance appraisal process that will be effective in the overall development of an employee throughout their career. In turn, this will enhance and strengthen the entire organization.

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## Appendix A: ARP Survey for MBFD Employees and Supervisors

As a student currently enrolled in the NFA's Executive Fire Officer Program, I am working on an Applied Research Project analyzing the effectiveness of the City's annual performance appraisal system. One of my research methods is to survey the employees and supervisors. I am asking you to complete the below survey. Your answers will remain completely anonymous. In order to ensure accurate data, please answer every question. Thank you for your time and cooperation.

1. Does the current performance appraisal system used by the City of Myrtle Beach evaluate your job performance in an effective manner?

Yes

No

2. Has your supervisor given you the expectations necessary to achieve a high score on your annual performance appraisal?

Yes

No

3. If two different supervisors did your annual performance appraisal, would the overall score be nearly the same?

Yes

No

4. Has your supervisor explained to you how the annual performance appraisal system works?

Yes

No

5. Would you be motivated to work harder if more money was tied to the annual performance appraisals?

Yes

No

6. Are all employees scored by the same standards under the current employee appraisal system?

Yes

No

7. Since every City job position is different, should the performance appraisals be specific to each job?

Yes

No

8. Has your supervisor been instructed to change your score by someone that does not directly supervise you daily?

Yes

No

9. Should annual performance appraisals carry more weight within the promotional process?

Yes

No

10. Are the current performance appraisals too subjective?

Yes

No

11. Do supervisors score their perceived friends and people they like better than people they do not?

Yes

No

12. Does the annual performance appraisal provide you good guidance for the future?

Yes

No

13. Does your supervisor resist scoring employees as “superior” because it involves more work for them by having to write a letter of support to accompany the evaluation?

Yes

No

14. Does the current annual performance appraisal system benefit you as an employee?

Yes

No

15. Is receiving your annual performance appraisal a positive experience?

Yes

No

16. Would it benefit you to get feedback from fellow employees of the same rank during your annual performance appraisal?

Yes

No

17. Do you get usable feedback from your supervisor during your performance appraisal meeting?

Yes

No

18. Does your supervisor provide you feedback about your job performance throughout the year?

Yes

No

19. Should you be allowed to provide anonymous feedback for your supervisor's annual performance appraisal?

Yes

No

20. Do you compare your performance appraisal with other employees?

Yes

No

21. Overall, how would you rate the City's employee appraisal system?

Excellent

Above Average

Average

Below Average

Poor

**Questions for supervisors only**

S1. Did you receive formal training on how to complete annual performance appraisals prior to completing your first one?

Yes

No

S2. Have you received refresher training on how to complete annual performance appraisals within the last 24 months?

Yes

No

S3. Have you scored an employee a certain way because you were influenced by a higher ranking officer?

Yes

No

S4. Does the current annual performance appraisal system need revamping?

Yes

No

S5. Is it difficult to find something relevant or useful to write when completing a veteran employee's appraisal?

Yes

No

S6. Is the current evaluation form is easy to use?

Yes

No

S7. Would it benefit you as a supervisor to get anonymous feedback from subordinates when during your performance appraisal?

Yes

No

S8. Do you score employees that are nice and personable higher on their performance appraisals regardless of their job performance?

Yes

No

S9. Do you have the same set method for completing all performance appraisals?

Yes

No

S10. Since you have to live in the same building as the other employees, do you tend to let “little” things go instead of addressing them on the performance appraisal to keep harmony?

Yes

No

S11. With the exception of the current fiscal year a merit raise or bonus was connected to the annual performance appraisal. When an employee received a 2% merit amount, that equates to an overall performance appraisal score of “meets expectations.”

True

False

S12. How much time do you take to complete an employee’s annual performance appraisal?

Less than 1 hr

1 hr

2 hrs

3 hrs

4+ hrs

S13. How often within the year do you meet with your employees to discuss their performance?

Monthly

Every other month

Every 6 months

Only at appraisal time

Appendix B: Executive Fire Officer Survey for City of Myrtle Beach Department Heads

<http://www.zoomerang.com/Survey/WEB22C63DYL2F4>

Executive Fire Officer survey for City of Myrtle Beach department heads.

**1.** Should the City have specific performance appraisals for each position based on job descriptions, instead of the same appraisal for every employee?

Yes  No

**2.** Does your department provide formal training to supervisors prior to completing their first employee performance appraisal?

Yes  No

**3.** Does your department require employees to complete a self-evaluation and submit it to their supervisor?

Yes  No

**4.** Does your department have established guidelines to ensure all employees are rated the same?

Yes  No

**5.** How often are supervisors required to meet with their employees to discuss their job performance?

Every month

Every other month

Every 6 months

Only at the appraisal meeting

Other, please specify

**6.** Which of the following best describes your department philosophy when scoring employees in each category.

Everyone begins as a 1, and works their way up based on performance

Everyone begins as a 3, and works up or down based on performance

Everyone begins as a 5, and works their way down based on performance

- It varies, we have no set philosophy
- Other, please specify

**7.** In your department, are performance appraisals included in promotional processes?

- Yes  No

**8.** Are the current appraisal forms easy to use?

- Yes  No

**9.** If given the opportunity, would you want to create an appraisal system for your department?

- Yes  No

**10.** Do you think it would be beneficial for employees to get feedback from other employees in the same position during their annual performance appraisal?

- Yes  No

**11.** How would you rate the City's employee appraisal process?

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Poor                  | Below average         | Average               | Above average         | Excellent             |
| 1                     | 2                     | 3                     | 4                     | 5                     |
| <input type="radio"/> |

**12.** If given the opportunity, what changes would you make to the current employee appraisal system?

Submit

Appendix C: Executive Fire Officer Survey of Fire Departments Appraisal Systems

<http://www.zoomerang.com/Survey/WEB22C54RGZBRZ>

## Executive Fire Officer Survey of Fire Department Appraisal Systems

1.

**Does your organization conduct performance appraisals on employees?**

Yes  No

2. **Which describes your type of fire department the best?**

- All Paid
- All Volunteer
- Combination

3. **How many employee does your department have?**

- Less than 50
- 51 to 100
- 100-150
- 151-200
- 201+

4.

**When was the last time your performance appraisals were updated?**

- Within the past year
- 1-2 years ago

- 3-5 years ago
- More than 5 years ago
- Other, please specify

5.

**Are there any financial incentives tied to the performance appraisal?**

- Yes, employees receive a merit raise
- Yes, employees receive a one-time merit bonus
- No, employees receive no financial incentives

6.

**Are your performance appraisals used in the promotional process?**

- Yes  No

7.

**When an employee becomes a supervisor, are they given formal training on how to complete a performance appraisal?**

- Yes  No

8. **Which one best describes your performance appraisals?**

- The appraisals are generic and all employees throughout the entire organization follow the same form.
- There are separate appraisals for each position, based on the individual job description.

9.

**Other than the employee's supervisor, who else participates in the performance appraisal process? Please check all that apply.**

- Supervisor only
- Other employees of the same rank
- Officers above the supervisor's rank
- Training officer
- Fire Chief

10.

**Does your department have guidelines to ensure everyone is rated in the same manner?**

Yes  No

11. **Is the performance appraisal form easy to use?**

Yes  No

12.

**How would you rate the effectiveness of your performance appraisal system?**

Poor	Below Average	Average	Above Average	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>				

Submit

## Appendix D: Fire Departments that received the Survey Request

**South Carolina Fire Departments**

City of Abbeville  
 City of Bennettsville  
 City of Charleston  
 City of Conway  
 City of Florence  
 City of Fountain Inn  
 City of Georgetown  
 City of Greenwood  
 City of Hardeeville  
 City of Irmo  
 City of Mauldin  
 City of Newberry  
 City of North Charleston  
 City of North Greenville  
 City of Rock Hill  
 City of Spartanburg  
 City of Sumter  
 City of Travelers Rest  
 City of West Florence  
 Clarendon County  
 Colleton County  
 Georgetown County  
 Lancaster County  
 Murrells Inlet-Garden City Fire District  
 St. John's Fire Department  
 Town of Beaufort  
 Town of Boiling Springs  
 Town of Hilton Head  
 Town of Mount Pleasant  
 Town of Surfside Beach

City of Anderson  
 City of Camden  
 City of Columbia  
 City of Dillon  
 City of Folly Beach  
 City of Gaffney  
 City of Greenville  
 City of Greer  
 City of Hartsville  
 City of Johnsonville  
 City of Mullins  
 City of North Augusta  
 City of North Charleston  
 City of North Myrtle Beach  
 City of South Greenville  
 City of Summerville  
 City of Timmonsville  
 City of West Columbia  
 City of York  
 Clemson University Fire Department  
 Darlington County  
 Horry County  
 Midway Fire District  
 Myrtle Beach International Airport FD  
 Sullivan's Island Fire Department  
 Town of Bluffton  
 Town of Burton  
 Town of Isle of Palms  
 Town of Simpsonville

**North Carolina Fire Departments**

City of Asheville  
 City of Concord  
 City of Greensboro  
 City of Monroe  
 City of Rocky Mount  
 City of Winston-Salem  
 Town of Nags Head

City of Charlotte  
 City of Greenville  
 City of Jacksonville  
 City of Raleigh  
 City of Wilmington  
 Town of Cary

**Virginia Fire Departments**

Albemarle County  
 Chesterfield County  
 City of Charlottesville  
 City of Harrisonburg  
 City of Lynchburg  
 City of Roanoke  
 City of Williamsburg  
 City of Hampton  
 Hanover County  
 James City County  
 Spotsylvania County

Caroline County  
 City of Alexandria  
 City of Danville  
 City of Hopewell  
 City of Richmond  
 City of Virginia Beach  
 City of Newport News  
 Goochland County  
 Henrico County  
 Prince George County  
 Town of Wytheville



S3. Have you scored an employee a certain way because you were influenced by a higher ranking officer?

Yes: 67% (20)

No: 33% (10)

S4. Does the current annual performance appraisal system need revamping?

Yes: 97% (29)

No: 3% (1)

S8. Do you score employees that are nice and personable higher on their performance appraisals regardless of their job performance?

Yes: 25% (7)

No: 75% (21)

S11. With the exception of fiscal year ending in June 2011, a merit raise or bonus was connected to the annual performance appraisal. When an employee receives a 2% merit amount that equates to an overall performance appraisal score of “meets expectations.”

True: 54% (15)

False: 46% (13)

Appendix F: Results from the “ARP Survey for MBFD Employees and Supervisors” for research question #2, shown in percent form with the actual responses in parenthesis.

2. Has your supervisor given you the expectations necessary to achieve a high score on your annual performance appraisal?

Yes: 79% (106)                      No: 21% (28)

3. If two different supervisors did your annual performance appraisal, would the overall score be nearly the same?

Yes: 40% (54)                      No: 60% (80)

4. Has your supervisor explained to you how the annual performance appraisal system works?

Yes: 81% (109)                      No: 19% (26)

8. Has your supervisor been instructed to change your score by someone that does not directly supervise you daily?

Yes: 53% (69)                      No: 47% (62)

11. Do supervisors score their perceived friends and people they like better than people they do not?

Yes: 71% (92)                      No: 29% (38)

20. Do you compare your performance appraisal with other employees?

Yes: 53% (72)                      No: 47% (65)

S5. Is it difficult to find something relevant or useful to write when completing a veteran employee’s appraisal?

Yes: 70% (21)                      No: 30% (9)

S6. Is the current evaluation form is easy to use?

Yes: 45% (13)

No: 55% (16)

S10. Since you have to live in the same building as the other employees, do you tend to let “little” things go instead of addressing them on the performance appraisal to keep harmony?

Yes: 34% (10)

No: 66% (19)

Appendix G: Results from the “ARP Survey for MBFD Employees and Supervisors” for research question #3, shown in percent form with the actual responses in parenthesis.

5. Would you be motivated to work harder if more money was tied to the annual performance appraisals?

Yes: 82% (113)                      No: 18% (24)

7. Since every City job position is different, should the performance appraisals be specific to each job?

Yes: 97% (131)                      No: 3% (4)

9. Should annual performance appraisals carry more weight within the promotional process?

Yes: 68% (91)                      No: 32% (43)

12. Does the annual performance appraisal provide you good guidance for the future?

Yes: 49% (65)                      No: 51% (68)

16. Would it benefit you to get feedback from fellow employees of the same rank during your annual performance appraisal?

Yes: 66% (89)                      No: 34% (46)

17. Do you get usable feedback from your supervisor during your performance appraisal meeting?

Yes: 85% (116)                      No: 15% (21)

18. Does your supervisor provide you feedback about your job performance throughout the year?

Yes: 53% (72)                      No: 47% (65)

19. Should you be allowed to provide anonymous feedback for your supervisor's annual performance appraisal?

Yes: 86% (118)                      No: 14% (19)

S1. Did you receive formal training on how to complete annual performance appraisals prior to completing your first one?

Yes: 40% (12)                      No: 60% (18)

S2. Have you received refresher training on how to complete annual performance appraisals within the last 24 months?

Yes: 17% (5)                      No: 83% (24)

S7. Would it benefit you as a supervisor to get anonymous feedback from subordinates during your performance appraisal?

Yes: 83% (25)                      No: 17% (5)

S9. Do you have the same set method for completing all performance appraisals?

Yes: 97% (29)                      No: 3% (1)

S12. How much time do you take to complete an employee's annual performance appraisal?

Less than 1 hr:	0% (0)
1 hr:	3% (1)
2 hrs:	17% (5)
3 hrs:	30% (9)
4+ hrs:	50% (15)

S13. How often within the year do you meet with your employees to discuss their performance?

Monthly:	18%	(5)
Every other month:	14%	(4)
Every 6 months:	43%	(12)
Only at appraisal time:	25%	(7)



6. Which of the following best describes your department philosophy when scoring employees in each category.

Everyone begins as a 1, and works their way up based on performance: 0% (0)

Everyone begins as a 3, and works up or down based on performance: 12% (1)

Everyone begins as a 5, and works their way down based on performance: 12% (1)

It varies, we have no set philosophy: 75% (6)

Other, please specify: 0% (0)

7. In your department, are performance appraisals included in promotional processes?

Yes: 100% (8)

No: 0

8. Are the current appraisal forms easy to use?

Yes: 88% (7)

No: 12% (1)

9. If given the opportunity, would you want to create an appraisal system for your department?

Yes: 57% (4)

No: 43% (3)

10. Do you think it would be beneficial for employees to get feedback from other employees in the same position during their annual performance appraisal?

Yes: 0% (0)

No: 100% (8)

11. How would you rate the City's employee appraisal process?

Excellent: 0% (0)

Above Average: 25% (2)

Average: 50% (4)

Below Average: 25% (2)

Poor: 0% (0)



6. Are your performance appraisals used in the promotional process?

Yes: 77% (33)                      No: 23% (10)

7. When an employee becomes a supervisor, are they given formal training on how to complete a performance appraisal?

Yes: 60% (26)                      No: 40% (17)

8. Which one best describes your performance appraisals?

The appraisals are generic and all employees throughout the entire organization follow the same form.                      67% (28)

There are separate appraisals for each position, based on the individual job description.                      33% (14)

9. Other than the employee's supervisor, who else participates in the performance appraisal process? Please check all that apply.

Supervisor only:                      26% (11)

Other employees of the same rank: 5% (2)

Officers above the supervisor's rank: 71% (30)

Training officer:                      2% (1)

Fire Chief:                      62% (26)

10. Does your department have guidelines to ensure everyone is rated in the same manner?

Yes: 71% (30)                      No: 29% (12)

11. Is the performance appraisal form easy to use?

Yes: 79% (33)                      No: 21% (9)

12. How would you rate the effectiveness of your performance appraisal system?

Excellent:	5% (2)
Above Average:	9% (10)
Average:	58% (25)
Below Average:	23% (4)
Poor:	5% (2)