Last July, I added a new element to our monthly department head meetings. We began what I've termed the "Great Performance" discussion. "Great" as opposed to "good," with an emphasis on improving rather than simply maintaining performance.

Although the emphasis on improvement is the underlying reason, there were two specific reasons I began the Great Performance discussion. The first was in reaction to annual employee evaluations. I wanted to improve the evaluation process. If I involved employees in setting their performance goals, then accomplishing them would be more of a commitment rather than a matter of compliance.

And with employee evaluations this year, we drew on the Great Performance discussion. As one department head noted of their evaluation, "There were no surprises." I expect that as we evaluate performance throughout the year, we will continue to improve as managers of our departments rather simply continuing to do as we've always done.

The second reason was that I was frustrated with our monthly department head meeting. On Monday mornings before Common Council meetings, we get together to provide updates on department activities and to review items on the Council agenda. The meetings were pretty innocuous, merely informative rather than productive. I wanted department heads to talk not just about the activities of their individual departments but also as managers and supervisors; the meetings should have been an opportunity to learn and to help each other.

Great Performance Cycle

I took the initial framework for our discussions from Jeff Russell, a business consultant and adjunct faculty member at UW-Madison. Russell describes it as, "Great Performance means more than business as usual or just getting the job done." Great Performance focuses on job performance, but it is more about strategic results rather than operational actions. And its emphasis on results and outcomes is rooted in a continual effort for improvement.

Russell presents the Great Performance Cycle. The first stage is to define Great Performance outcomes based on the organization's mission, the customer's needs, and leadership's vision. The second stage is to develop goals and strategies and to take actions to achieve the desired outcomes. Next, the cycle includes providing support: training, resources, tools, information, or feedback. Support by the organization is critical to foster an environment of improvement, to remove roadblocks, and to provide resources necessary for success.

The next step in the Great Performance Cycle is to evaluate performance. This involves asking a series of questions. What worked? What didn't work? Why? What will I keep doing? Or what will I do differently? What help is needed in the future? Coming from the evaluation are two parallel paths on the cycle. One is to provide logical consequences for performance outcomes; depending on the performance there may be positive or negative consequences. And the other is to make improvements to improve future success. In both cases, the cycle returns to the stage of defining Great Performance outcomes, and the cycle begins anew.

Businesses and entrepreneurs reading this might recognize the Great Performance Cycle as a variation of the Shewhart Cycle popularized by W. Edwards Deming: Plan-Do-Check-Act. The

greatest difference is that the Great Performance Cycle explicitly includes organizational support through training, resources, and feedback as a distinct step. Both cycles seek continual improvement.

Critical Thinking
The cycle is not a quick fix; it is an ongoing effort. And it requires self awareness and evaluation: critical thinking about our own performance as department heads, as managers.

In keeping with the theme of commitment and buy-in, the Great Performance discussions are voluntary. But all department heads are participating. They have commented that it makes them think and has been a helpful and worthwhile addition to the department head meetings.

At our meetings, the Great Performance discussions have included individual worksheets to identify essential job functions, conversations about customer service and supervisory duties, and broad discussion questions such as "What enables Great Performance?" Future Great Performance discussions will involve case studies, articles, video interviews, events in the news, worksheets, and especially our own experiences.

At our monthly meetings, I've been setting the discussion according to the early stages of the Great Performance Cycle: defining outcomes, developing goals, and providing support. The discussions build on earlier discussions, and this spring I expect to come around to the later stages of the cycle: evaluating performance and making improvements. As we become more familiar with working in the cycle and with critical thinking, I have a couple fascinating articles about feedback and learning which I want to use as springboards for discussion with the group.

Performance Partnership
Over the next couple months, we're taking a book club approach to Great Performance. We will be reading (actually with busy schedules a few of us will be listening on CD while commuting) the book The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything by Stephen M. R. Covey. I expect the book, and more importantly our discussion of it, to enhance partnership among department heads.

In The Speed of Trust, Covey outlines behaviors of trust-inspiring leaders, such as demonstrating respect, creating transparency, righting wrongs, delivering results, and practicing accountability. This is in line with department head observations that as supervisors we need to lead by example and model the behavior we expect of our staffs. And I think Trust to be especially vital since local government is a service business.

The topic of Trust is a certainly valuable for personal growth and individual Great Performance. But I think it also invites a transition from concentrating on individual performance to focusing on interaction among department heads. And this is what I find extra exciting: a new spin around the Great Performance Cycle to identify outcomes, to set goals, and to evaluate performance as an organization.