

CONDUCTING EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS

- I. Overview
- II. Why Assess Performance?
- III. When to Conduct a Written Performance Assessment
- IV. Conducting the Performance Assessment Meeting
- V. Setting “SMART” Goals
- VI. Avoiding Common Rating Errors
- VII. Managing Performance Throughout the Year

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I. Overview

As a supervisor, one of your most challenging and rewarding responsibilities is managing the performance of the staff you supervise. **Performance Management** within the University of Maine System is designed to promote and enhance collaboration and communication between employees and their supervisors. It consists of three essential components:

- **Mutually established goals/priorities** for the employee that are tied to departmental and University goals,
- **Ongoing support, coaching, and feedback** by the supervisor,
- **A performance assessment meeting accompanied by a written document** (sometimes called a performance evaluation) at least annually.

This guide is offered to help you navigate the third area of Performance Management—the **assessment meeting and the written document**. Throughout this guide, the assessment meeting and accompanying document will be referred to as the Performance Assessment.

II. Why Assess Performance?

In the University of Maine System, we believe that:

- The work of every employee contributes to the experience of the students, faculty, and staff through educational, research, and service activities of the University;
- Our employees are dedicated to providing high quality service to students, the University, and the community;
- The University is committed to supporting employees to foster the greatest possible value and satisfaction through their work.



For managers and supervisors, Performance Assessment can...
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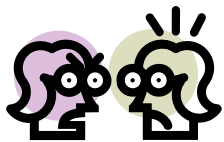
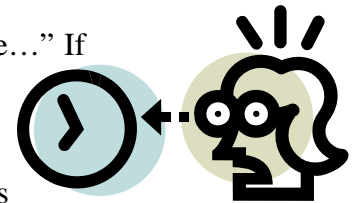
- Provide a useful tool for effectively managing their employees' work and productivity;
- Develop or improve communication and working relationships with employees;
- Improve individual performance and teamwork;
- Identify high performers for possible advancement;
- Identify areas that need development or improvement, and individuals who need coaching or counseling;
- Provide documentation to support personnel actions.

For employees, Performance Assessment can...

- Develop or improve communication and working relationships with their supervisor;
- Provide recognition and an understanding of their role in and contributions to the University;
- Allow them to participate in a meaningful way in the Performance Management process;
- Encourage them to take responsibility for their performance;
- Clarify expectations so they can direct their efforts;
- Help them better understand the basis for personnel actions;
- Help with career development.

Common Reasons Why Some Supervisors Don't Conduct Performance Assessments

“I don't have time.” “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure...” If you don't take the time to plan and give feedback, invariably you will end up stalling, getting sidetracked, or generally being less efficient. Taking a few hours to plan the performance assessment and discuss it with the employee will save you time, work, and performance problems in the long run.



“I really hate confrontation or being mean to an employee.” Part of your job as supervisor is to teach or guide your employees to do the best they can. If you are not honest with them in a sensitive way, you do them a disservice. If you have trouble saying difficult things to other people, you may want to read up on techniques for holding difficult conversations, or ask for coaching from your Human Resources office.

“I have no idea how to conduct a Performance Assessment meeting.” Read on.

“The employee already knows how s/he's doing.” Everyone likes to hear how they're doing from their supervisor. One of the main reasons that people report they are happy – or unhappy – with their job is their supervisor. Think about how good you feel when your supervisor offers you praise. And when you get constructive feedback, it isn't always easy, but you know where you stand.

“Performance Assessments don't really mean anything.” Actually, they do. Conducting a thorough, objective Performance Assessment and setting goals can motivate and encourage all employees to keep up their good work or improve.

III. When to Conduct a Written Performance Assessment

Board of Trustees policy, collective bargaining agreements, and employee handbooks require that each employee receive an annual written Performance Assessment from his or her supervisor. Generally a written Performance Assessment is conducted:

- **Before the end of an employee's probationary period**, usually six months for classified positions and one year for professional positions.

Note: A written performance assessment is required every six months during a represented professional employee's probationary period.

- **At least annually after the probationary period ends.**

Note: For represented employees the annual assessment must be done on the anniversary of the employee's date of hire.

It is also appropriate and useful to conduct more frequent written assessments when an employee's performance in some areas is unsatisfactory or needs improvement. The purpose of an **interim assessment** – which may be done at three-month, six-month, or other intervals – is to provide the employee with clear feedback necessary to improve performance and to document whether performance is improving.



The written performance assessment should **always be accompanied by a one-on-one meeting** with the employee.

Note: Two UMS collective bargaining agreement (ACSUM/COLT and UMPSA) specifically state that if a supervisor doesn't do a performance assessment within 30 days of its due date, the employee's performance is assumed to be satisfactory; the employee can ask Human Resources to put a satisfactory assessment statement in the personnel file. But don't let the assessment default to satisfactory. An employee whose performance is satisfactory or better deserves a thorough review and a chance to participate in assessment and goal-setting. An employee whose performance is not satisfactory needs to know which areas need improvement.



Remember: Although the written assessment may be done only once a year, it is part of an ongoing cycle of Performance Management by the supervisor that occurs throughout the year.

IV. Conducting the Performance Assessment Meeting

You'll enjoy a highly productive meeting when you and your employee come to it well-prepared. The discussion is an opportunity to build a strong relationship between you and your employee, where both of you feel free to talk about the job, how it is being done, and what improvements can be made. When both of you are prepared, the meeting will be more relaxed and constructive.

Prepare the employee...

1. Tell the employee approximately when the assessment meeting will be so s/he can also prepare.
2. Explain that the purpose of the Performance Assessment is to review the employee's past performance and plan for future performance.
3. Let the employee know that the meeting will involve a dialogue and that you welcome and expect his or her active participation.
4. Give the employee a packet that includes the following:
 - The Instructions for Employee Performance Assessment
 - The blank Employee Self-Assessment (Part 1)
 - A copy of the blank Employee Performance Assessment (Part 2) that you will complete
 - A copy of the current job description for the employee's position.
5. Ask the employee to complete the Employee Self-Assessment (Part 1). Ask professional employees to return it to you a week or more before the meeting to assist you in developing the final assessment. Ask classified employees to choose whether to give it to you a week before the meeting or bring it with them to the meeting. Note: Completion of the Self-Assessment is **optional** for employees in the Service & Maintenance and Police Units.



Prepare yourself...

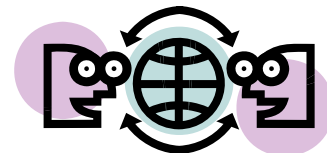
1. Review any documentation you have of the employee's performance during the assessment period. It is helpful to keep an ongoing file of notes and examples of the employee's work throughout the year so that you have this information readily available when it is time to complete the annual Performance Assessment.
2. If you plan to request input from other sources – such as co-workers in the employee's or other departments, or other staff for whom the employee provides support services – do it in a consistent manner.
3. Review the job description.
4. Review the employee's last performance assessment. Have last year's goals been met?
5. Identify some specific examples of duties and responsibilities that the employee performed well.
6. Identify specific areas where the employee could do better, and think through the question, "What can the employee do to make a greater contribution in these areas?"
7. Prepare some draft performance goals for the next review period based on the employee's strengths as well as areas needing development, and based on department needs. Think about what you can do to help the employee meet these goals.

8. Draft your ratings and comments on Sections I and II of the Employee Performance Assessment form.
9. Schedule a specific time for the performance assessment meeting, assuring a private place to meet without interruptions.

Conduct the assessment meeting...

Set the climate:

1. Be sure the employee understands the purpose of the Performance Assessment discussion.
2. Let the employee know that the discussion is to be a dialogue about his or her performance. Encourage participation.
3. Review the discussion format you will use. Explain that the discussion will include:
 - Things the employee does well (areas of strength)
 - Things the employee can improve (areas for further development)
 - Development of goals for the coming year.



Discuss performance: As you discuss the employee's performance (Sections I and II of the form), keep in mind that:

1. The discussion is a summary of the employee's performance over the *entire* review period, not just the most recent performance.
2. The employee should not be hearing about performance problems for the first time at this meeting. Previous discussions should have occurred when performance concerns arose.
3. The annual Performance Assessment discussion is *not* a step in the disciplinary process. This is the time to acknowledge the employee for his or her accomplishments and contributions, and to coach/counsel/plan for improved performance. ("If you don't, then I will...." statements are inappropriate in this discussion.)
4. If you are relying on negative performance information provided by third parties, discuss it with the employee well before the Performance Assessment meeting. It is unfair to treat feedback from others as "fact" without hearing the employee's point of view on the feedback.



Tips for an Effective Meeting

- ✓ Be as specific as possible about performance activities; give examples and explain the "why" of the rating.

- ✓ Don't get sidetracked or bogged down in details.
- ✓ Be positive where possible, but also be candid.
- ✓ Provide both positive feedback and constructive criticism.
- ✓ Close with a summary that leaves the employee with a clear understanding of where s/he stands, what is necessary to meet performance expectations, and how and when you will provide assistance.
- ✓ Reassure the employee of your interest in his or her progress and willingness to have continued communication.
- ✓ Listen as much as you talk.

Develop Goals Together: Involve the employee in setting goals and target dates for the coming year. For information about setting goals (see below). Goals must be appropriate to the employee's job classification, unless they reflect the employee's own goals for personal or professional enrichment.



Develop a Performance Improvement Plan: A written Performance Improvement Plan should be developed and included on the Employee Performance Assessment form for any employee who receives one or more ratings of "*Needs Improvement*" or "*Unsatisfactory*." If the employee is willing, ask him or her to contribute suggestions for the Improvement Plan. The Performance Improvement Plan should identify:

1. The particular areas of performance in need of improvement;
2. Specific steps the employee should take to improve performance, including ways that you as the supervisor will assist or support the employee;
3. The timeframe by which improvement is expected; and
4. Date of an interim evaluation to discuss and assess progress on the Performance Improvement Plan. **Do not wait until the next regularly scheduled annual Performance Assessment** to determine whether progress is being made.

V. Setting SMART goals

Setting Goals Together



Setting mutually agreeable performance goals with employees allows you and the employee to share hopes and ideas for the future. Setting goals at least annually, if not more often, will lead to higher levels of performance and more motivated employees.

Performance goals should be set *with* employees, not *for* employees. The purpose of setting goals is to give employees targets on which to focus. If the employee hasn't participated in establishing these goals, s/he is less likely to buy into them and find them motivating. Involving employees in the goal setting process is critical.

It's possible that an employee may not agree with a goal that you, as the supervisor, know must be met. If this happens, make sure the employee understands that performance will be evaluated next time on the degree to which the goal is met.

In the Goals section of the Employee Performance Assessment form, you and the employee list goals to increase the employee's effectiveness. Performance goals can be based on information discussed in the rating of performance factors (Section II of the Employee Performance Assessment form), or they may come from the job description (Section I). They may also simply reflect the employee's personal and career advancement interests.



Goals can help you and your employee in different ways. They may be:

- **Routine goals** Describing regular, ongoing activities

Examples: *Reconcile Budget & Expense statements within a week of receipt from Finance Office (ongoing).*
 Remove snow from and salt/sand walkways and building entrances at the start of each shift (ongoing).
- **Problem solving goals** Describing activities designed to remedy performance areas that need improvement

Examples: *Check supply inventory bi-weekly and re-order as needed to avoid shortages starting (month/date).*
 Arrive promptly at start of shift each day to eliminate tardiness.
- **Innovative goals** Describing activities that create or expand capabilities

Examples: *Design and implement use of spreadsheet by (date) to track loan of departmental audiovisual resources.*
 Research, test, and evaluate 3 new vegetarian entrees by (date).
- **Personal growth goals** Describing activities the employee wants to pursue for personal development

Examples: *Register for a fall introductory course to become more familiar with use of personal computers.*
 Volunteer within next 2 months to lead a discussion at staff meeting to improve public speaking skills.
- **Job enrichment goals** Expanding the current job with different activities

Examples: *Within 3 months train with supervisor to assume responsibility for compiling information for quarterly activity report.*

You might want to ask the employee to write down possible goals before coming to the assessment meeting. This involves the employee from the start in the goal setting process and gives him or her opportunities for job enrichment. It may also give you new information about what satisfies and motivates the employee.

Note: Goals should not involve adding duties that are beyond the employee's current job classification or job description.

Writing Effective Goals

What makes a good goal statement? Use the "SMART" acronym.

S – Specific
M – Measurable
A -- Attainable
R -- Relevant
T -- Time framed

1. Specific – Write a concise statement of the goal that tells what needs to be accomplished and when – the specific results or outcomes expected.
2. Measurable – Include in the specific goal statement the measurements to be used to determine that the results or outcomes expected have been achieved. Measurements are not necessarily quantitative.
3. Attainable – The expected results or outcomes must be within the authority, skill, and knowledge level of the employee, and the resources needed to achieve the goal must be available to the employee.
4. Relevant – The expected results or outcomes should support the department's and/or the University's mission and plan; and/or the results or outcomes should contribute to the department's needs or the employee's personal development.
5. Time framed – Deadlines for achieving expected results and outcomes should be set, not left open-ended. Deadlines can be extended when circumstances warrant, but should be re-set and monitored.

In other words, the goals you and your employee write should answer these questions:

- **WHAT** specifically do you want to improve or accomplish?
- By **HOW MANY, HOW MUCH, or TO WHAT EXTENT?**
- By **WHEN?**



The number of goals is not nearly as important as their quality. Two or three well thought out, specific goals that will have a positive impact on the employee and department can form a strong, appropriate performance plan.

Supporting and Monitoring Goal Achievement

You need to provide your employee with the assistance or resources needed to meet his or her performance goals. This might mean providing the employee with:

- Equipment, material, or facilities to do the job
- Additional assistance from other staff
- Authorization for the employee to do the job
- Coaching or training.



You can monitor performance in a number of ways:

- Collect or have the employee collect performance data
- Meet face-to-face to review progress
- Physically check the work on a regular basis
- Gather data at predetermined times.



Once performance goals are set, your job will be to continue ongoing coaching, feedback, and discussion to keep your employee's performance on track.

VI. Avoiding Common Rating Errors

To be fair and objective, a Performance Assessment must be based on the employee's job-related behavior, not on the employee's personal traits and not a comparison to other employees.

Type of Error - What Not to Do/What to Do

Contrast effect Don't evaluate people in comparison with others. "No, he doesn't really deserve an 'Outstanding' rating, but compared to the other employees, he really stands out." Do rate them against the standards for the job.

First impression Don't let your initial positive or negative judgment of an employee color your later Performance Assessment. A new supervisor noted one employee who was going through a divorce performing poorly. Within a month, the employee's performance had returned to its previous high level, but the supervisor's opinion of the person's performance was negatively affected by the initial negative impression. Do weigh evidence fairly.

Type of Error - What Not to Do/What to Do Cont'd

Halo/horns effect



Don't make inappropriate generalizations from one aspect of an employee's performance to other areas of that person's performance. David was outstanding in his ability to repair equipment. His excellence in this area led his supervisor to rate him highly in unrelated areas where his performance was mediocre. Do look at all aspects of your employee's work.

Similar-to-me effect

Don't rate people who resemble you more highly than you rate others. Marge, a single mother, had worked hard and been promoted to supervisor. She unconsciously rated several women who were also single parents higher than their performance warranted. Do respect differences in talents among your staff.

Central tendency

Don't rate employees in the middle of the scale if their performance clearly warrants a significantly higher or lower rating. Bill's desire to avoid conflict led him to evaluate all employees he supervised as "Satisfactory." Do be honest – it's only fair!

Negative or positive skew

Opposite of the central tendency. Don't rate employees higher or lower than their performance warrants. "No one in my department will get higher than 'Satisfactory' because I want them to have something to strive for." Do be honest – it's only fair!

Recency effect

Don't allow minor, recent events to have more influence on the rating than those occurring throughout the review period. Because Max doesn't keep notes of the overall performance or important incidents of his employees' work, he can't remember examples from more than two months ago when he sits down to do their performance assessments. Do keep a file for your employee and drop notes into it throughout the year.

Stereotyping

Be careful not to generalize about members of a group and ignore individual differences. Although Joe is the youngest staff member in the unit, he's one of the most dependable. However, Maria rates the older, more experienced staff higher than Joe because he has fewer years in the job. Do recognize individual differences.

Frame of reference error

Be careful not to compare an employee's performance to your own personal standards. Do rate your employee based on the job description or written performance standards. Peter rates Conrad as "Satisfactory" on attendance. Although Conrad has used his leave time appropriately, Peter feels that only 100% attendance warrants a higher rating.

Information about common rating errors has been adapted from Richard Grote's *The Complete Guide to Performance Appraisal*, New York: American Management Association, 1996 and Howard University's website on its Performance Evaluation Program (www.hr.howard.edu/totcomp/PEP).

VII.. Managing Performance Throughout the Year—NEXT STEPS



REMEMBER: Performance management is not just a “once a year thing.” It’s a year-round, ongoing supervisory process that includes:

- Continually complimenting an employee on accomplishments, large and small
- Thanking the employee often for specific contributions
- Keeping communication open
- Giving specific directions with timeframes
- Checking in regularly to see whether progress toward annual goals is on track
- Giving timely, specific feedback about performance
- Documenting less-than-satisfactory performance when appropriate.