

A CHECKLIST FOR PERFORMANCE PLANS

This article provides a checklist of questions that may help supervisors and employees determine the effectiveness of the elements and standards they developed and whether those standards meet legal and regulatory requirements. The checklist contains questions about nine important criteria for employee performance plans that represent sound management principles as well as complying with regulations and Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) and court decisions:

- Are the elements truly critical?
- Is the meaning of acceptable performance clear?
- Are the standards attainable?
- Are the standards challenging?
- Are the standards fair?
- Are the standards applicable?
- Will employees understand what is required?
- Are the elements and standards flexible?
- Is the Fully Successful level surpassable?

If your program appraises elements at levels above the Fully Successful or equivalent level, is the Fully Successful or equivalent standard surpassable?

Are the critical elements truly critical?

Would failure on the critical element mean that the employee's overall performance is unacceptable? For instance, assigning generic critical elements to all employees, regardless of the type of work they do, can be risky if the generic element does not truly represent their work. As an example, if a medical organization required that every employee's performance plan include a critical element about teamwork, and its world-renowned research scientist, who independently made a scientific breakthrough, fails the teamwork element, would the organization be willing to rate the scientist as unacceptable? Although teamwork may be important to the organization, it may not be important in this particular job. Supervisors should assign critical elements carefully.

Is the meaning of acceptable performance clear?

Are the expectations established in the elements and standards quantifiable, observable, and/or verifiable? Expectations that are specific and that clearly define what must be done as well as how well it must be done are more effective for managing and directing performance than vague or general expectations. In addition, MSPB and the courts have ruled that employees must know what they have to do and how well they have to do it to perform at an acceptable level. Both sound management principles and court rulings support this key criterion.

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Are the standards attainable?

Are expectations reasonable? MSPB and the courts have ruled that, in most instances, retention standards must not require absolute perfection. In addition, from a sound management perspective, research has shown that setting expectations that are impossible or nearly impossible to achieve can actually cause performance levels to drop because employees tend to give up if they perceive the goal as impossible.

Are the standards challenging?

Does the work unit or employee need to exert a reasonable amount of effort to reach the Fully Successful performance level? Or do they merely need to show up to work in order to be considered Fully Successful? Research has shown that setting expectations that are too easy (or too hard) lead to low performance. Because research also shows that specific, challenging expectations result in higher performance, the best Fully Successful or equivalent standards will find a balance between being too hard or too easy.

Are the standards fair?

Are they comparable to expectations for other employees in similar positions? Applying different standards to employees doing the same work does not appear on its face to be fair or valid. Requiring higher-level management review of standards for similar work across an organization might be one way of ensuring equity. Also, do the standards allow for some margin of error? Requiring perfection, especially at the retention level, is not fair in most instances.

Are the standards applicable?

Can the appraiser(s) use the standards to appraise performance? The standards should clearly describe the factors that the appraiser(s) would look for and how well those factors should be done (i.e., the quality, quantity, timeliness, and cost-effectiveness requirements). In addition, can the appraiser(s) effectively use the data collected through the measurement process? If monitoring performance on the element is too costly or time-consuming, the standard might need to be altered to include more manageable measures.

Will employees understand what is required?

If the standards are generic, have they been supplemented with specific information so that employees know what they have to do to demonstrate Fully Successful performance? Elements and their standards should be written clearly and be specific to the job.

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Are the elements and standards flexible?

Can they be adapted readily to changes in resources or performance elements? Elements and standards can be modified during the appraisal period to meet changing organizational goals and other situations, as long as the employee works under the new standards for at least the minimum period established by the applicable appraisal program (generally between 60-120 days) before a rating of record is assigned. This flexibility allows performance plans to be used as management tools to manage employee performance on a day-to-day and week-to-week basis rather than as a bothersome, meaningless paperwork exercise that is done once a year and never referred to again.

Is the Fully Successful standard surpassable?

Is it possible for an employee's performance to exceed the standard? By including Fully Successful standards that cannot be surpassed, the performance plan effectively eliminates the higher assessments.

The benefits of following this checklist can be greatly enhanced by involving employees in the development of performance plans. By being involved, employees will have a better understanding of what is expected of them, will understand the terminology used, will understand how their performance will be measured, and will be more likely to accept and trust the whole process.