



Foreign Service Performance Evaluations - Board Observations and Comments

A Mandatory Reference for ADS Chapter 459

Revision Date: 07/06/2006
Responsible Office: M/HR
File Name: 459mab_070606_cd44

PERSONNEL

USAID/General Notice
M/HR/EM
08/22/2005

Subject: Foreign Service Performance Evaluations - Board Observations and Comments

In a continuing effort to enhance the Agency's performance evaluation process, the Office of Human Resources is sharing observations and suggestions offered by the 2005 FS Performance Boards. We hope the information below, which provides insight into what the Boards value, will assist raters and those rated in preparing illuminating, concise, and competitive performance evaluations this rating cycle. Somewhat surprisingly, even though a new AEF format was put in place this year, many of the comments from the Boards are strikingly similar to those of previous years.

BOARD RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RATERS AND APPRAISAL COMMITTEE

- 1) Raters need to avoid technical jargon and unexplained acronyms; it may help to keep in mind that one of the Performance Board members is always public member who may not be familiar with USAID-speak.
- 2) Raters should evaluate an officer's performance in management of both human and financial resources by giving specific examples and quantifying where appropriate.
- 3) Supervisors who provide their staff with challenging and complex work objectives (WOs) and provide constructive feedback throughout the rating period will likely have the most productive and highest-ranked employees.
- 4) It is the responsibility of the rating officer to point out performance weaknesses to the rated officer during the review cycle so that he/she knows where to concentrate efforts to improve. If after counseling there is insufficient improvement in performance, raters need to be much more candid about the quality of performance and potential. By the same token, a record of growth that shows that employees have taken advantage of constructive feedback can be very powerful in the eyes of Performance Board members.
- 5) Raters are reminded that supervision is one of their most important responsibilities. It is an ongoing process, not one that only happens at the mid-point and end of the rating cycle. Too often it appeared that supervisors did not provide timely feedback, thus placing themselves in the position of being unable or unwilling to provide honest feedback at the end of the cycle.
- 6) The Agency needs to find ways to reward particularly conscientious supervisors and mentors. Supervisory and mentoring skills are not highly enough regarded in the current reward system.

7) While most Appraisal Committee sections were left blank, Performance Board members found them to be generally useful when narrative was included. In addition, as a general comment, Boards noted that the reduced narrative seemed to squeeze out 360° comments.

BOARD RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EMPLOYEES

General

Despite the annual exhortations in the AEF guidance, more attention needs to be given to editing and proofreading. Once again, many AEFs had typographical and/or grammatical errors throughout the form, including the employee statements. Many evaluations contained too many gratuitous superlatives and not enough concrete examples of accomplishments and their detailed impact on the mission/organization development goals. Qualitative statements which were not supported by factual descriptions and examples were not helpful to employees' advancement. In some appraisals, less-than-stellar performance issues were alluded to, but never properly addressed.

Role in the Organization

The "Role in the Organization" section was not utilized to its full potential in most AEFs. It should describe the employee's role in the organization and not repeat standard boilerplate language on the role of the mission or Washington bureau/office. Many raters merely copied this section from what was in the previous year's AEF. Not all raters took full advantage of this section to describe particular country/mission/office issues (e.g., poverty, health, education, political turmoil, key relevant U.S. foreign policy issues/goals related to Presidential initiatives, etc.) to help explain to the Board what specific challenges were faced by the employee to accomplish the work objectives. "Role in the Organization" is the section for a complete description of continuing responsibilities; this is not the area for discussion of WOs. Remember: WOs will stand out and be more meaningful if the context of continuing responsibilities has been well-defined under "Role in the Organization." This section is also an appropriate place to explain if an employee switched posts, so that the Board has a clear picture of the changes in the employee's duty station and work environment.

Performance Measures and Work Objectives

Work objectives (WOs) and performance measures (PMs) need to be defined in clear, concise, objective and measurable terms. WOs should be specific and discrete and should focus on what is to be accomplished by the end of the twelve-month rating cycle. When WOs are complex and challenging, there is a greater chance for promotion. Many employees had WOs that were insufficiently distinguishable from some of their colleagues in the same Mission or Office, leaving Board members to wonder who actually did the work. More consideration needs to be given when establishing PMs. They should be objective, quantifiable statements that communicate to the employee the acceptable performance level of a given work objective. PMs address quantity, quality, timeliness, or

the most cost-effective way of accomplishing the WO. Numerous PMs were identified with rating officials providing only superficial discussion of the employee's performance in achieving these measures. If the "so what" question is not answered, then the employee's relative competitiveness is compromised. Employees and raters should be sure that WOs and skill areas are written to conform to the employee's current grade. A number of WOs and appraisals focused on internal, bureaucratic processes, which made them less competitive. Many evaluations treated these internal processes as ends in themselves and did not go to the next step of addressing how the employee made a difference or what the results were. This significantly weakened the impact of the evaluation. Raters need to link employee's impact/accomplishments clearly with the achievement of specific work objectives.

Employee Statement

The employee statement continues to be seen as a "suicide box" in many instances; sufficient time and attention must be given to this section to do a year's worth of work justice. One Board wrote: "The capacity for self-destruction is little short of amazing." In this section, employees would be wise to also make sure to include any admissible information regarding gaps in time during the rating cycle. In many cases, more care should have been taken in the preparation of the employee statement. More effort needs to go into defining for the reader what specifically the employee learned and how they grew and improved during the rating cycle. Given the limited space available to the rater for performance assessment, the employee statement offers an excellent opportunity to provide additional information for the employee to "complete the appraisal picture." Above all else, be sure to proofread your statement, and if you choose to address an area of disagreement with your rater, it is highly recommended that you keep those comments brief and to the point while providing an overall positive tone with your statement.

Mid-Cycle Review

The Mid-Point Progress Review section was used in a variety of ways. Most effectively, it was used to provide a snapshot of progress halfway through the cycle. It can also be used to highlight significant events, like political turmoil, natural disasters, etc. This section provides valuable additional space and raters would be wise to take advantage of it. The importance of timely, face-to-face, and properly documented mid-cycle reviews cannot be overstated. The mid-cycle review section provides an excellent opportunity to take advantage of this space and to expand the picture of the employee's performance. Raters should comment in detail on the employee's performance to date and not merely note that a progress review was conducted. Raters optimally utilizing this section were able to provide more information to the Board than those raters who chose not to take advantage of this additional space. In cases where significant events occurred during the cycle, such as civil strife or a tsunami, the realignment of WOs is quite helpful, especially if a time frame is provided. Supervision is an ongoing process, not just a review during mid-cycle or at the end of the cycle. Timely feedback is necessary for all employees.

Appraisal Committee Comments

This section was also used differently by many Missions and Offices. For many AEFs, the section was left blank. Board members believe that this section provides valuable space for ACs to weigh in and provide additional context or support (or lack thereof) for raters. The AC section affords additional valuable space if used wisely and may have a potent effect on the Board.

BEST PRACTICE SUGGESTION

Officers scored much better when their Performance Measures and appraisal narratives indicated interest, involvement and impact in programmatic or operational areas outside their core area of expertise and responsibility, such as SO team participation, strategy development or program design, participation on inter-agency task forces or working groups, etc. Demonstrating the ability to stretch beyond the confines of the officer's specialty, even without changing specialty, are favorably viewed as showing that the officer can operate at a broader level. For example, a legal officer might lend his/her expertise to programs in Democracy and Governance, including judicial reform. A controller or executive officer might support government reform programs in anti-corruption, accountability and transparency. Clearly shining above others were those employees who took on additional work, responsibilities and/or risks, and who volunteered for difficult or unusual assignments to support Agency development priorities.

In summary, to quote one board, "It is crucial to have a strong role in the organization, a wide range of challenging and complex work objectives that cover the required FS skills, and an informative/thoughtful employee statement...." Being mindful of the above suggestions and observations when preparing and completing the AEF will go a long way to increasing the competitiveness of the evaluation.

Point of Contact: Any questions concerning this Notice may be directed to Bill Martin, M/HR/EM, (202) 712-0373, or Darren Shanks, M/HR/EM, (202) 712-5685.

Notice 0877