Tips for Managers: Avoiding Common Rating Errors

In order to build trust in the performance management process it is important that ratings accurately reflect employee performance. Avoiding rater bias can be achieved through a better understanding of the university's rating scale. Below is a list of common rating errors to keep in mind:

**Attribution:** Tendency to attribute performance to external causes.

**Central:** Majority of individuals rated in the middle. Managers who display central tendency tend to ignore or suppress differences. This tendency, which produces ratings that do not distinguish between employees, damages morale and makes decisions for pay for performance, promotions, or training difficult to justify. Avoid this tendency by:
- Documenting observable behavior over the entire performance cycle;
- Ask yourself if you are seeing the person’s behavior objectively. Seek behavioral examples from others.

**Comparison:** Tendency to rate people in comparison to other individuals instead of documenting performance goals and competencies. This tendency can be particularly unjust when comparing a person to someone else who is an extraordinarily high performer. Avoid this tendency by:
- Establishing clear SMART performance goals at the start of each performance cycle, and
- Evaluating performance against those goals.

**Halo/Horn:** High (or low) rating given to an individual based on a single performance goal or competency. This effect is also demonstrated if you let an overall global impression of the employee influence the ratings. It often occurs with employees who are friendly or unfriendly toward the manager or who are especially strong or weak in one skill. Avoid the Halo/Horn effect by:
- Establishing clear and specific standards;
- Maintaining good documentation of employee performance over the review period;
- Keeping things in perspective in terms of frequency, significance in the overall picture, and representation of the person’s overall performance;
- Identifying specific behavioral examples which support your ratings; and,
- Asking yourself if you have overemphasized aspects of the person’s performance you find particularly admirable or irritating.

**Leniency:** Majority of individuals rated at the high end of the scale. In order to avoid this bias, measure performance against established standards and expectations that are reasonable and attainable. Compare your ratings with peers. Are your ratings significantly higher than the ratings of others? Don’t be afraid to provide honest, fair, constructive ratings.

**Primacy:** Ratings reflect only initial observation of behavior. It is often hard to overcome our first impressions of someone’s behavior and we must challenge ourselves to notice behaviors that support other impressions. Avoid this tendency by:
● Documenting observable behavior over the entire review period and giving it balanced consideration; and
● Checking to see if anything you have documented presents a view different from your initial impression. If not, ask yourself if you are seeing the person’s behavior objectively. Seek behavioral examples from others.

Recency: Ratings reflect only the most recent observations of performance or behavior. Recent observations tend to be more in the forefront of the manager’s mind and therefore more “memorable.” Avoid this tendency by:
● Documenting observable behavior over the entire performance cycle and giving it balanced consideration; and
● Asking others for their observations of the employee over the course of the year to see if they have different views than you.

Similar-to-Me Effect: Tendency to rate people who have qualities that you perceive in yourself. There is a common tendency for managers to rate those who are different from them lower than those similar to themselves. Avoid the Similar-to-me Effect by:
● Becoming aware of your own biases and challenging them;
● Having clearly defined and agreed upon goals and competencies identified;
● Regularly collecting documentation of observable performance covering the entire review period;
Checking to see if your ratings are significantly different across groups, e.g., different for men and women, different across racial lines.

Stereotyping: Tendency to generalize across groups and ignore individual differences.

Strictness: Opposite of leniency; ratings at low end of the scale.
● Ask yourself if your ratings distribution compares to that of your peers.
● Are your ratings significantly lower than the ratings of the others?

General guidelines for avoiding bias and evaluating employee performance objectively:
● Work with each employee at the beginning of the review cycle to develop S.M.A.R.T. performance goals and corresponding competencies.
● Focus on observable behaviors related to goals and competencies throughout the evaluation period; document observations and provide feedback and coaching to the employee;
● Compare observed behaviors to the established goal or competency, not to other people or the employee’s past performance.
● Consider factors which may have changed the nature or scope of the job, including circumstances beyond the employee’s control your own role in the employee’s performance;
● Focus on the employee’s work and not on tangential personal matters, unless those personal matters affect the work of the employee; and,
● Check your perceptions for accuracy, fairness, balance, reasonableness, and consistency.