

Performance Excellence | Supervisor Guide to Performance Ratings

Understanding Annual Performance Review Ratings

The annual performance rating reflects the supervisor's overall assessment of an employee's performance across the entire performance cycle. The rating should consider the employee's responsibilities and expectations, accomplishments and results, progress toward goals and development, contributions and impact, and how the employee demonstrated university, MAU and department values.

Performance ratings require supervisory judgment. Because roles, responsibilities and opportunities vary across the university, the ratings are not intended to function as a checklist or rigid scoring rubric. Supervisors should consider the expectations of the individual role and the employee's performance within the context of those expectations.

Selecting an Overall Performance Rating

Use these questions and considerations to evaluate the employee's overall pattern of performance before choosing a rating.

Before selecting a rating:

Consider the employee's performance across the entire review period—not simply the most recent events, one significant accomplishment or one performance concern. Consider both what the employee accomplished and how the work was accomplished.

[MSU's values of Collaboration, Equity, Excellence, Integrity and Respect](#) provide an important foundation for considering how employees contribute to the university and the workplace.

Using professional judgment to select an overall rating:

There is no mathematical formula for determining the overall performance rating. Step back and consider the overall pattern of performance. Things to consider:

- **Expectations:** What did successful performance reasonably require in this employee's role during this performance cycle?
- **Results:** How consistently did the employee fulfill those responsibilities and expectations?
- **Quality and effectiveness:** How well was the work performed?
- **Impact:** What difference did the employee's work make for colleagues, customers, students, stakeholders, the unit or university?
- **Values and behaviors:** How did the employee demonstrate Collaboration, Equity, Excellence, Integrity and Respect while accomplishing the work?
- **Consistency:** Is the rating supported by a pattern across the performance cycle rather than an isolated event?
- **Context:** Were expectations, priorities, resources or circumstances significantly different during the year?
- **Evidence:** Can I explain the rating using specific examples and observations rather than general impressions?

Final check

If the employee asks, “What specifically led you to this rating?” can you explain your judgment clearly and fairly?

Ratings should not be a surprise:

The annual review should summarize conversations that have occurred throughout the performance cycle—not introduce performance concerns for the first time.

When an employee’s performance begins to fall below Successful, supervisors should address the concern when it occurs. Avoiding a difficult conversation during the year does not make the concern disappear at annual review time; it can make it harder to assess performance fairly and harder for the employee to understand the rating.

Effective ongoing coaching includes:

- Clearly communicating the expectations and any performance gaps.
- Providing specific, timely feedback.
- Listening to understand barriers or circumstances affecting performance.
- Clarifying what improvement looks like.
- Identifying appropriate support, resources or development.
- Following up to discuss progress and provide additional feedback.

At the same time, a supervisor’s failure to provide timely feedback should be considered when evaluating the circumstances. Employees should have a reasonable opportunity to understand expectations and respond to performance concerns.

Understanding the Four Performance Ratings

Use the same three-part approach for each rating: review the definition, consider how it may show up in the employee’s role, and keep the key distinction in mind.

Exceeds Expectations

The employee consistently demonstrates performance that goes meaningfully beyond what is expected for successful performance in the role, resulting in notable added value or impact.

Exceeds Expectations recognizes a sustained pattern of performance and contribution that is distinguishable from strong, successful performance. What this looks like will vary by position.

Examples/Considerations

- Consistently producing results, contributions or outcomes that go meaningfully beyond the expectations of the role.
- Demonstrating exceptional effectiveness, initiative, judgment, problem-solving or leadership appropriate to the position.
- Identifying and implementing improvements that meaningfully enhance work, service, processes or outcomes.
- Having a positive impact that extends beyond completion of the employee’s own responsibilities.
- Demonstrating MSU and applicable MAU/department values in ways that positively influence the work environment, relationships or outcomes.
- Responding effectively to changing priorities, challenges or complex circumstances.

Keep in Mind

Exceeds Expectations does not require special projects, work outside the position, or simply doing more work. Employees have different access to opportunities. Focus on the quality, consistency, and impact of performance within the employee's role and individual circumstances.

Successful

The employee consistently and effectively fulfills the responsibilities and expectations of the role and contributes positively to the success of the unit and university.

A Successful rating means the employee is doing the job well. It should **not** be interpreted as average or mediocre. An employee can be highly skilled, dependable, accomplished and valued—and appropriately receive a Successful rating.

Examples/Considerations

- Consistently producing quality work and results that fulfill the expectations of the position.
- Demonstrating the knowledge, skills and judgment needed to perform the role effectively.
- Being dependable and following through on responsibilities and commitments.
- Effectively adapting to normal changes, challenges and priorities associated with the work.
- Building and maintaining productive working relationships.
- Contributing ideas, solutions and improvements appropriate to the role.
- Making meaningful contributions to team, unit or university priorities.
- Consistently demonstrating MSU and applicable MAU/department values.

Keep in Mind

A Successful rating recognizes strong, effective performance. It reflects an employee who consistently fulfills the responsibilities and expectations of the role, produces quality work, and makes valued contributions to the organization.

Developing/Growth Needed

The employee demonstrates strengths and may successfully meet many expectations, but improvement or growth is needed in one or more meaningful areas for performance to be consistently successful.

An employee at any career stage or length of service may appropriately receive Developing/Growth Needed when meaningful improvement is needed. The rating should be based on the current performance cycle.

Examples/Considerations

- Some responsibilities or expectations are being met successfully while others are not yet being met consistently.
- Work quality, timeliness, reliability or follow-through need meaningful improvement.
- Additional development of knowledge, skills or judgment is needed to consistently perform the role successfully.
- The employee requires greater direction, follow-up or support than is reasonably expected for the role or circumstances.
- Workplace behaviors or relationships are interfering with individual, team or unit effectiveness.
- The employee is not consistently demonstrating MSU or applicable MAU/department values or behavioral expectations.

- A performance concern may have improved but sustained “Successful” performance has not yet been demonstrated.

Keep in Mind

Developing/Growth Needed is not limited to employees who are new to a role. An employee can have meaningful strengths and contributions while also having performance gaps significant enough to warrant this rating.

Does Not Meet Expectations

The employee is not meeting significant expectations of the role, and the performance gaps require substantial and sustained improvement.

Examples/Considerations

- Important job responsibilities or expectations are repeatedly not being met.
- Work quality, timeliness, reliability or effectiveness falls substantially below what the role requires.
- Significant performance concerns continue despite feedback, coaching or support.
- Behaviors significantly interfere with the effectiveness of colleagues, the team, customers, stakeholders or the unit.
- The employee does not demonstrate important behavioral expectations or applicable university, MAU or department values.
- The overall pattern of performance demonstrates that substantial improvement is necessary.

Keep in Mind

This rating reflects significant performance gaps requiring substantial and sustained improvement. A Does Not Meet Expectations rating requires a [Performance Improvement Plan](#); supervisors should consult with their unit HR representative and MSU Employee and Labor Relations before meeting with the employee.

Decision Support:

Successful or Exceeds Expectations?

Use this section after reviewing the rating definitions when you need help distinguishing strong Successful performance from Exceeds Expectations.

This is often the most difficult distinction. Begin with the role: What would strong, successful performance reasonably look like in this employee’s position?

- Did the employee perform those expectations very well—or did performance consistently go meaningfully beyond them?
- What was different because of the employee’s contribution? Look for added value in outcomes, service, effectiveness, problem-solving, processes, relationships, capacity or other role-relevant impact.
- Was the distinction sustained or based mainly on one exceptional project or moment?
- Is the distinction based on impact—or simply volume, visibility, long hours or access to special assignments?
- How did the employee accomplish the work? Consider results together with behaviors and values.

Statements such as “They are dependable,” “They always get their work done,” “They are excellent at their job,” “They work very hard,” or “They are one of my strongest employees” can describe a very strong Successful employee. They do not, by themselves, establish an Exceeds Expectations rating.

Recognition and ratings serve different purposes. Supervisors should recognize and communicate appreciation for excellent contributions throughout the year without feeling that Exceeds Expectations is the only way to tell an employee that their work is valued.

When you are still unsure which rating best reflects the employee’s overall performance, use this simple test:

A Useful Test for Exceeds Expectations

Complete this sentence: “This employee consistently went beyond successful performance by _____, which resulted in _____.” A supervisor should be able to describe both the meaningful difference and why it mattered.

Successful or Developing/Growth Needed?

Use this section after reviewing the rating definitions when you need help determining whether the employee’s overall performance is consistently Successful or whether meaningful improvement is needed.

Begin with the expectations of the role: Is the employee consistently performing at the level reasonably expected for successful performance?

- Are the employee’s responsibilities and expectations being fulfilled consistently, or are there meaningful areas where performance is not yet at the expected level?
- How significant are the performance gaps? Consider their impact on work quality, timeliness, reliability, results, relationships, the team, or others.
- Does the employee require more direction, follow-up, correction, or support than would be reasonably expected for the role and circumstances?
- Are concerns isolated or occasional, or do they represent a pattern that affects the employee’s overall effectiveness?
- Has improvement occurred, and if so, has Successful performance been demonstrated consistently enough to support that rating?
- How is the employee demonstrating MSU and applicable MAU/department values and behavioral expectations?
- Have expectations and concerns been communicated clearly, and has the employee had a reasonable opportunity to respond and improve?

Keep in Mind

An employee does not need to be unsuccessful in every aspect of the role to receive a Developing/Growth Needed rating. Employees can have meaningful strengths, accomplishments, and contributions while also having performance gaps significant enough that improvement is needed for performance to be consistently Successful.

A Useful Test for Successful vs. Developing/Growth Needed

Complete this sentence:

“For this employee’s performance to be consistently Successful, they need to improve _____ because _____.”

If the supervisor can identify a meaningful performance gap and explain why it matters, Developing/Growth Needed may be the more appropriate rating. If they cannot identify a meaningful gap in meeting the expectations of the role, Successful may be the better fit.

Important Reminders

Keep these principles in mind when applying ratings across different roles, teams and circumstances.

Ratings are not a curve. There is no required distribution of ratings within a team. It may be entirely appropriate for many employees to be rated Successful.

Successful is not average. It represents strong, effective performance that fulfills the expectations of the role.

Exceeds Expectations is about meaningful distinction, not opportunity. Special assignments, visibility, workload or additional hours should not automatically determine the rating.

Developing/Growth Needed is a legitimate performance rating. It can be used for employees at any career stage when meaningful improvement is needed for performance to be consistently successful.

Performance concerns should be addressed when they occur. Supervisors are responsible for ongoing feedback and coaching rather than postponing difficult conversations until the annual review. Contact your unit HR representative if support is needed in how to address performance concerns.

Behavior and values are part of performance. How the work is accomplished matters just as much as what is accomplished. Professional, respectful, collegial, and courteous behavior should be part of an employee's performance expectations.