



is very close to the one well known by its esoterically technical name, “favoritism.” Appraisals based largely on work done toward the end of a work period suffer from *recency* error. Many employees make it their business to be at their best during the month preceding an annual appraisal interview. Finally, *contrast* errors derive from the tendency to rate an employee in direct comparison with another, rather than against a set of objective standards.

The structure of the appraisal instrument affects the likelihood of biases operating. Clear definitions of not only the dimensions of performance but also different levels of performance help to minimize the occurrence of errors from appraiser bias. While appraiser training can constitute another foil to these errors, considerable relevance and objectivity can be built into performance appraisal through the instrument itself.

Types of Appraisal Instruments

Many types of appraisal forms are in use. The *graphic rating scale* is by far the most widely used type. These scales come in different formats. All require the appraiser to choose the most descriptive rating or evaluative adjective from a linear graph of possibilities ranging from worst to best or vice versa. Major distinctions between formats are how the performance criteria (dimensions) and performance levels (standards or degrees) are defined.

A second type of instrument approaches performance measurement through any one of what might be termed comparative techniques. All methods of this

type put appraisees up against one another and require the appraiser to make distinctions among them. Specific types include the *ranking*, *paired comparison*, and *forced distribution* methods. They are not favored in many quarters because they focus on and often exaggerate differences between employees rather than measuring each individual against a consistent standard.

In *checklist* methods, the appraiser checks or ranks items on a given list of adjectives or statements about employees. Sometimes a hidden scoring formula is used by personnel staff to translate the rater's choices into numerical indexes on one or more performance dimensions. Most appraisers dislike not knowing the meaning of their checks.

The *critical incident technique* enjoyed a period of fashionability years ago and still has its ardent proponents. A supervisor using it makes notes throughout a performance period about performance episodes that represent "critical" examples of performance on the job—good and bad. An instrument may contain categories to help sort such incidents as accumulated. A performance incident, for example, might be recorded on the form as an example of "better than average" on the job task "inspects equipment." This technique certainly focuses the appraiser on observable behavior. It provides specifics for discussion in the eventual appraisal interview and reduces recency error by sampling performance from throughout the period. But it is somewhat tedious, has sinister little-black-book overtones, and may not produce information that can be well-used comparatively.

Another type of instrument is the *essay* appraisal form. It gives the appraisers freedom of expression, but it also tends to yield assessments that are uneven as a collection and are difficult to compare.

Performance appraisal instruments based on *behaviorally anchored rating scales* (BARS) have standards defined in behavioral terms by typical instances of behavior corresponding to the different possible ratings (i.e., degrees of performance). A BARS form describes behaviors representing different levels of goodness or effectiveness for all major duties (or dimensions) of the job. Different raters are much more likely to give the same employee the same scores using this form than one in which performance levels are unanchored. It is especially valuable for jobs where there are a number of workers doing the same thing and there are specific expectations about what they should do. A well-constructed BARS form is also a handy supervisory and communications tool for development purposes. It describes in concrete terms how to perform various parts of the job well.

Developing a BARS rating form requires the answers to two questions:

1. What are the important duties that make up the job?
2. What does excellent, acceptable, and unacceptable performance in each of these duties look like?

Ideally, managers and job incumbents work together to answer these questions and, in so doing, come to a shared understanding of performance expectations. Many potential surprises are thus nipped in the bud.

Sample performance appraisal instruments, such as the following, are available at AgHelpWanted.org.



A “Behaviorally Anchored Rating Scale”

Job duty: Cleans and performs routine maintenance on milking machines.

1	3	5
Operates broken equipment	Reports needs for repair	Anticipates breakdowns

