



Performance-Based Conversations

What should we talk about?

The Basic Principle	The conversations between supervisors and employees are really the most important part of managing performance – whether establishing expectations, checking in on progress, or providing feedback (and positive feedback is just as critical as “constructive” feedback).
Having the Discussions	<p>Setting expectations is a continuous two-way street. Supervisors have expectations of their employees, and employees have expectations of their supervisors. Each may <i>think</i> they know what the other expects, but are they <i>sure</i>?</p> <p>If you think back to your first day in your job, or your first day with a new boss - were you totally clear on what your boss expected of you? Did they sit down with you to talk about what success in your respective roles looked like? Looking back, what do you wish you’d talked about that first day?</p> <p>Conversations around performance shouldn’t be limited to “sign here”. They’re the opportunity for supervisors and employees to make sure they’re on the same page, they have the same priorities, progress is being made toward goals, and obstacles are being managed.</p>
Frequency	USDA policy requires supervisors to have performance conversations with each employee no less frequently than once a quarter. We don’t specify exactly <i>when</i> in the quarter because they should be happening whenever it would be most useful; for example, when a new project is being assigned, when an employee first hits a roadblock on getting something done, or simply when either the supervisor or employee wants clarification on where things are.
Formality	<p>These conversations don’t have to be formal, and they don’t even have to be scheduled in advance. If an employee asks a supervisor for five minutes to talk about an area where they’re stuck on a project, and the conversation focuses on clarifying expectations or how to manage an obstacle, that’s a performance conversation, so document it as such!</p> <p>At the same time, it’s also useful to schedule conversations and talk about what you’ll want to be focusing on in a specific conversation. This permits supervisors and employees to do some thinking about it beforehand and determine what their questions and areas of uncertainty might be, and feel prepared to have a meaningful conversation.</p>
What to Talk About	<p>Every conversation will be a little different because every employee is different. In the next few sections you’ll see a list of questions that might be useful to discuss at the various stages of the performance year. You don’t need to cover them all, but they can be a starting point to make sure you’re thinking about what’s most important.</p> <p>For the sake of simplicity, they’re written from the perspective of a supervisor, but employees can certainly raise the questions themselves if they wish.</p>
Developing Performance Plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are your most critical outcomes for the coming year?• Are you clear on how those outcomes link to agency or staff office strategic goals?• What do you think I expect of you this year?• What organizational goals influence your priorities?• What projects would you like to take on this year?• How will we measure your work?

- How will we measure the quality or manner of performance?
- How will we know if you're meeting your targets?
- If you're in a learning phase in any area, are your standards and measures appropriate?
- What known challenges will potentially get in the way of accomplishing your goals?
- How often should we check in with one another to review your progress?
- What do you expect of me as your supervisor?

Checking on Progress

- How are things going with your performance goals?
- What do you want to accomplish in the next month? The next three months?
- At this point in the year, is your progress toward your goals at least 25%, 50%, or 75% [depending on the quarter]?
- If not, what is your strategy to finish by the end of September?
- Are you running into any unexpected obstacles?
- How can we best manage those?
- Have any organizational priorities changed that should influence how you spend your time for the rest of the year?
- Do you anticipate any other issues getting in the way of accomplishing your goals?
- If you're ahead of schedule on meeting your goals, are there any projects you'd like to join?

Discussing New Assignments

- What's the best way to include this in your performance plan?
- What measures should be established?
- How will this impact your other goals?
- What adjustments do we need to make around that?

Areas for Development

- Are there any areas where you'd like to take some formal training to help you in your current role?
- Are there any details or cross-training opportunities you'd like to pursue to help you in your current role?
- [For an employee who is new to a role] Are you finding you have the right resources available to locate the information you need?

Providing Feedback

There are already a number of courses on AgLearn around providing both positive and constructive feedback, so we won't recreate them here. Just remember that feedback is a crucial part of managing performance, especially positive feedback – that's the only way employees will know what to continue doing well.

Final Thoughts

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to performance-based conversations. Some employees – and even some supervisors - will be less experienced than others, some will already be very motivated, and others perhaps less ambitious, and each scenario would indicate a different focus. And in every conversation it's important to listen, and then listen some more.

The really important thing is to keep the conversations frequent so the communication will readily flow both ways.
