U.S. Office of Personnel Management

Quick Guide: Understanding Standardized Distribution and Calibration

Fairness, Consistency, and a High-Performing Workforce

Federal employees deserve a performance management system that is fair, transparent, and applies standards consistently across organizations. A standardized distribution supported by calibration helps promote these goals by ensuring that similar levels of performance receive similar recognition across the workforce. This approach strengthens confidence in performance ratings by helping ensure that ratings are based on documented accomplishments, demonstrated results, and meaningful contributions to organizational success.

What Is a Calibration-Based Approach?

Calibration is a structured review process in which leaders at various levels review performance ratings and their supporting evidence across work units to ensure that similar levels of performance receive similar ratings. Reviewing ratings collectively at an appropriate aggregate level complements the appraisal conducted by the individual supervisor, helps promote accuracy and consistency, and reduces rating inflation.

Flexible Distribution Ranges for Subcomponents

Agencies are responsible for meeting the OPM-established distribution limits at the agency level but may employ "flexible distribution ranges" for agency subcomponents, divisions, centers, or other organizational units. Unlike rigid quota systems, flexible ranges allow agency subcomponents to apply different ratings distribution limits based on agency-established criteria, such as the subcomponent's organizational performance.

This approach helps balance two important considerations:

- Recognizing that subcomponent performance will vary from year to year and may warrant issuing a proportionally higher number of top ratings.
- Maintaining consistent rating practices across the organization and ensuring the agency as a whole does not exceed the OPM-established ratings distribution limitations.

Benefits for Employees

Fairer, More Objective Decisions

Employees performing at similar levels should receive similar ratings. Calibration reduces inconsistencies by focusing performance discussions on documented accomplishments and measurable results rather than subjective impressions, increasing confidence that ratings reflect actual performance. Because ratings are applied against consistent standards across the organization, a high rating carries the same meaning regardless of which office or supervisor assigned it.

Increased Transparency

A standardized process helps employees better understand how performance is evaluated and how ratings are determined throughout the agency.

Recognition of High Performance

Flexible distribution ranges help agencies ensure that the highest ratings are reserved for truly exceptional performance while continuing to recognize strong contributors at all levels.

Benefits for Agencies

Consistency across Organizations

Calibration helps ensure that performance standards are applied similarly across offices, programs, and geographic locations.

Better Workforce Management

Reliable performance data supports decisions related to employee development, awards, succession planning, and organizational performance improvement.

Stronger Accountability

Supervisors are expected to provide meaningful performance feedback, maintain documentation that supports rating decisions, and apply performance standards consistently.

Increased Credibility

Employees are more likely to trust a system that applies common standards across the workforce rather than one that varies significantly from office to office.

What Employees Should Know About Calibration

Employees sometimes ask whether calibration can change their supervisor's rating. Calibration may result in adjustments to preliminary ratings, but any changes must be documented and justified against the same established performance standards used by the supervisor. Individual performance remains the foundation of every rating decision.

The Bottom Line

A calibration-based approach with flexible distribution ranges helps create a performance management system that is fair, transparent, and consistently applied. By focusing on documented performance, common standards, and thoughtful review, agencies can strengthen confidence in the rating process while supporting a culture of excellence and accountability throughout the Federal workforce.