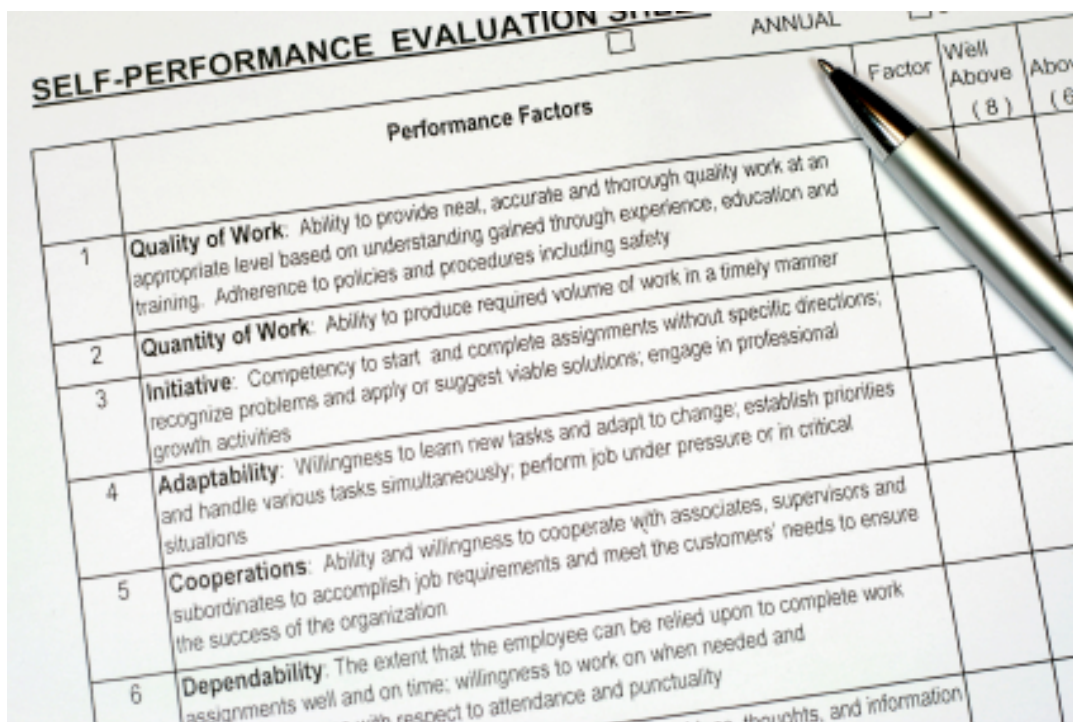


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# A Guide to writing better assessment criteria for Appraisals and 360° Reviews

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## Introduction

This guide is aimed at helping Human Resources practitioners improve the outcomes from performance reviews such as Manager/Employee appraisal and 360 degree feedback by developing better assessment questions.

The starting point for the creation of such assessments would typically be a grounded and validated competence framework combined with role profiles that draw on that framework. We would always recommend that organisations start with a proven model and that the competences reflect the nature of the business and its market. The competences and associated behavioural indicators and activity statements, add more value to the business if they also describe an aspirational future for the role and the business.

We are skilled in helping organisation create and generate buy-in for such definitions, either from scratch or from a sound basis such as the Chartered Management Institute's Competence Framework, of which we are licensees.

A Competence Framework and associated role profiles and linkages 'come alive' when applied to the business in the context of talent management processes such as performance management, succession planning, high potential identification and development planning. Our Talent® suite of software products can help you do just that.

This guides shows how, once you have a competence framework, to create meaningful assessments from it to enable it to 'come alive' and contribute value to the business.

## Nine Key Principles

### 1. Connecting the question 'stem' and the scale to be used

For rating questions start by defining the 'question stem' you will use. An example of a question stem for a 'frequency' rating scale is, "Rate how FREQUENTLY this person:" The text of the question should then read on from this stem. For example you may type, "Ensures performance targets are clear and understandable to others."

When the questionnaire is published the full question will then read, "Rate how FREQUENTLY this person: Ensures performance targets and clear and understandable to others."

Also take care to ensure that there is nothing in the question such as adverbs or adjectives that would 'interfere' with the rating scale. An example being 'Conveys consistently clear messages'. The use of 'consistently' which would interfere with a frequency based scale.

### 2. Is it about me or is it about them?

The vast majority of assessments made within the context of an Appraisal or 360 degree review are of other people even though most assessments processes include some form of self rating. For example, in a 360 degree review perhaps only one of 7-10 assessments are a self assessment. There is nothing worse than an assessment item that appears to be about you when you are rating some else, or about some one else when it is a self assessment. When the success of an assessment process often depends on someone being honest about themselves and their own performance and behaviour,

Talent® allows you to specify a different question stem for the participant (self-rating). For example, "Rate how FREQUENTLY you:'

If you use this feature you may want to adjust the question for the 'Self' group to use the third person rather than the second person, i.e. "Ensure performance targets are clear and understandable to others.

The full question will appear to the participant as, "Rate how FREQUENTLY you: Ensure performance targets are clear and understandable to others."

When using a descriptive-based or extent-based scale, such as ('Hardly at all' to 'A great extent'), then questions such as:

To what EXTENT do you:

*Demonstrate readiness to change your views or perceptions in light of new information,*  
and,

To what EXTENT do you:

*Monitor your impact on an audience and adapt your style accordingly*

Clearly only apply to the self-review and would be very confusing for other's trying to rate the individual. Those review questions would be better phrased as below:

To what EXTENT do they:

*Demonstrate readiness to change their views or perceptions in light of new information,*

and

To what EXTENT do they:

*Monitor their impact on an audience and adapt their style accordingly*

### **3. Make each observable, measurable and active**

Better questions are those that are based on behaviours that are readily observed or performance indicators that are measurable. Good questions typically use an active verb which describes the action a rater would be able to observe.

Avoid terms such as 'understand' and try to define an action that raters could be reasonably expected to observe so that they can provide accurate ratings. It would be difficult to observe such things as 'Thinks things through carefully' and 'Identifies best possible solutions' as they are both internal. The results of 'thinks things through carefully' might be more readily observable in the following terms 'When challenged, is able to offer in-depth rationale for proposed solutions'.

### **4. Test one thing at a time**

Make sure your question is only asking one thing. If you include too many elements into a single question it makes it harder for a rater to provide a clear response. The person may do some of the things better or more consistently than others. Asking complex questions tends to result in more median ratings in response and it is much harder to interpret the feedback.

Notwithstanding the example question in point 2, the example question provides some context in the first item to allow the rating of the (more important) second item (i.e. to adapt their style). Unless you are using Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scales (BARS), multiple conditions should be avoided but that doesn't mean never use 'and', just limit it to where you need to clarify the scope or use of the behaviour (e.g., Implements projects and programmes effectively), or to incorporate two comparable and very similar conditions (e.g., 'Procrastinates and acts indecisively'). We will discuss BARS in a later article.

### **5. Use simple language**

The clearer you can make the question, the clearer the feedback. We recommend you review the question items with a representative sample of people from each of the reviewer groups to identify any questions that could be misinterpreted.

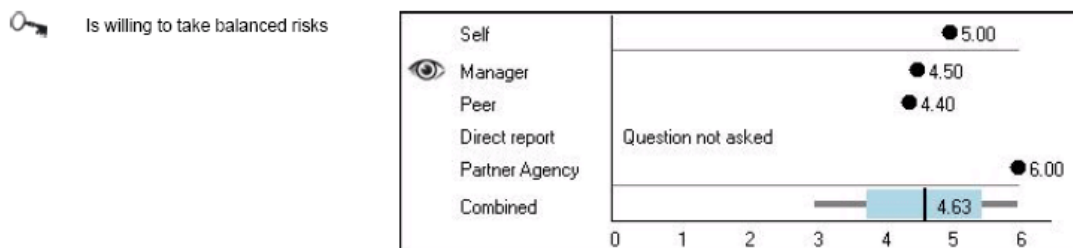
Avoid use of jargon especially in questions that will go out to external reviewers. Talent® includes the option to write different versions of questions for different reviewer groups. This allows you the flexibility to use the terms the group understand.

## 6. Combine free-text and ratings questions

Research has shown that reviewers are more willing to provide more accurate ratings (towards the ends of the scale) if they have the opportunity to provide a text explanation. Participants often find the text feedback most valuable, however there is a balance between insisting that these free-text questions are answered and the amount of time it takes to do so. We would not recommend making free text questions mandatory unless that is an essential part of complying with an established process.

## 7. Not all indicators are equal - if they are key to the role, use keys

Talent® allows you to mark specific questions as 'key indicators'. This is not visible in the questionnaire itself, but a 'key' icon is placed beside the question in the personal report that is generated at the end of the review.



You can adapt the way you use this feature, but it is intended to add to the information available when interpreting the feedback. We use it to identify behavioural indicators that others in the organisation regard as *key* indicators of high performance or high potential. These are typically senior managers with experience managing performance or making selection/promotion decision.

## 8. Some are better placed to observe than others

Some reviewer groups will be better placed to observe a particular behaviour than others. This may be because the behaviour is often directed towards them or that they are the receiver of a particular activity.

Marking a review group as 'well placed' in the questionnaire means that an 'eye' icon is placed next the reviewer group in the detailed report generated at the end of the process. It adds to the interpretation of the feedback because if there is variation in the ratings between different reviewer groups, the participant will be prompted to consider which review group is best-placed to observe the behaviour and to focus on the feedback from this group. The examples above and below show the use of the 'Eye' symbol.

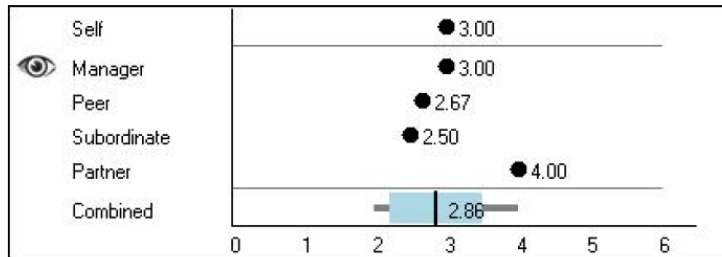
## 9. Make use of negative or contra-indicators

Some behaviours are easier to observe when they are expressed in a negative way. An example might be 'Is dismissive of critical feedback'. This can be a much more effective question to use than the more commonly expressed question 'Accepts both positive and negative feedback'. The former is likely to elicit an accurate response; the latter is more likely to generate a middle rating.

It is possible to develop questionnaires with solely positively oriented questions, however the use of negative questions can highlight common 'derailers' and these types of questions can be very powerful when used for strictly behavioural reviews and with an extent or frequency-based scale and reflect Peter Drucker's insight that "*half the leaders I have met don't need to learn what to do. They need to learn what to stop.*" Our analysis indicates that raters are more willing to express any concerns in a contra-indicator format than "rate down" any positive behavioural statements.

When you include negatively or contra - orientated questions, Talent® inverts the rating scale so that the scores are consistent with the positively orientated questions. An arrow icon is placed beside negatively orientated questions in the personal reports to distinguish where this is the case.

◀ Relies on one influencing style or tactic



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