Questions, Concerns and Comments
AO/SED Conference
San Francisco – June, 2008

No.	Question, Concern, Comment	Response
1.	According to the last Awards Notice, the fiscal year the 25% of the award money was to be used for was unclear. Could you define the year for which the 25% of the money applies?	As a rule, the 25% of the money (which is for Superior Accomplishment Awards) is for the fiscal year the policy is issued, so the money in the last Awards Notice (which was issued in FY 2008) is for FY 2008. However, accomplishments from previous fiscal years can also be recognized using this money, if not previously rewarded.
2.	Can we write standards for a specific person to deal with a specific problem?	This is not advisable. It is better to work within the current performance plan to improve the employee's performance. If you do change a plan in response to a specific need, to ensure consistency also make those changes for everyone else who is doing that job. Write performance plans for the work to be done, not to address people problems. If you have an employee that consistently demonstrates less than fully successful performance, you should contact your servicing Employee Relations Specialist and consider putting that employee on an Opportunity To Improve (OTI). With an OTI, you can write with more specificity than you normally would in a performance plan, clarifying issues as needed, addressing specific problems, etc. Also, consider if the problem is a conduct issue and not a performance issue at all.
3.	Are there limits to individualization?	Yes. As mentioned above, write performance plans for the job to be done, not to reflect individual personal traits. This is a good opportunity for communication throughout all the levels.
4.	Can we personalize?	Again, write performance plans for the job to be done, not to reflect individual personal traits.
5.	Measures are supposed to have some objectivity. Page 12 slide example is subjective. How are standards weighted? Or truly measurable? Objective vs. Subjective	Although you can never take subjectivity completely out of the process, measures should be as objective as possible. If you focus on the results which will flow from achieving standards, objective measures, tied to the agency's strategic goals should be possible. We are currently looking into the

		"weighting" of standards question and will issue guidance as soon as we have all the facts.
6.	Should supervisors tell their employees what they need to do to exceed?	Yes. Ask yourself, what do I want the individual to do in this area? Then set a fully successful and exceeds standard. Identify potential problems in advance.
7.	Managers and Supervisors should not be asked to define Superior and Outstanding or even Exceeds. Delineating is unreasonable.	Delineating, or making distinctions in levels of performance, is key to a successful performance management system. Employees must be encouraged to improve their performance and this can best be done by explaining to them what Exceeds performance is. We want employees as knowledgeable as possible at the beginning of the process. Employees want to and deserve to be informed. When employees understand what their goals are, they usually strive to meet and exceed them and this is exactly the kind of behavior we want to encourage. Again, when setting expected levels of performance, don't think in terms of Superior or Outstanding – these are summary rating levels that will shake out with the final ratings. Think in terms of the 3 element rating levels – Meets, Exceeds, and Does Not Meet.
8.	How can supervisors handle mitigating factors if they have given the employee a list of expectations?	At the beginning of the appraisal cycle, anticipate as much as possible and communicate the variables in everything that may happen. Communication is the key. At the end of the appraisal cycle, when you are doing the rating, be sure to consider any extenuating circumstances that may have occurred during the year. For example, if there are extensive floods in the state and the employee has to spend a lot of time on disaster assistance, take this into account when assessing their accomplishments in their other areas of responsibility.
9.	How are standards weighted and how do they relate to elements?	We are currently looking into the "weighting" of standards question and will issue guidance as soon as we have all the relevant information.
10.	What is our best tool for choosing standards?	A discussion between supervisor and employee on the key parts of the work to be done in the upcoming year as well as the job duties set down in the employee's position description.
11.	We are concerned about tracking of qualitative measures. Example – giving instructions to	One of the things to consider when establishing measures is the ease with which they can be tracked. If it takes half your time to track something, that's

	customers	probably not a good thing to chose.
12.	Do we have to build in an Outstanding or Exceeds instruction?	This doesn't need to be actually written in the performance plan, but it needs to be communicated to the employee in some form, preferably written.
13.	Can we have an absolute standard?	Generally, avoid absolute standards. You can have standards with two or more components, one of which is absolute, but the general rule is to avoid absolute standards unless "absolutely" necessary. Ask yourself, would you want to have this standard? If you must have an absolute standard, it must be reasonable and clear that this standard needs to be absolute.
14.	If it has more than 1 component to it, can you fail 1 component of a standard and still pass the standard?	Yes.
15.	What if the item is not within the control of the employee?	Care must be taken that the requirements to meet the standard are within the employee's control.
16.	What if the menu standard is written for something that is not in the reviewee's control?	The standard can be modified or removed if it does not apply.
17.	How do you establish the philosophy of your state? How do you get that philosophy out to the employees of that state?	The SED should be at the forefront setting the state's philosophy. Communication and training are the keys to getting everyone in the state involved.
18.	Are we stuck with canned standards?	No, modification is permissible.
19.	Can you put in a standard that is hard to measure but addresses an issue you are concerned with in order to make a point?	Yes, but that would be difficult to deal with. If you do use a standard that is hard to measure, you will still be expected to actually measure it and articulate how you measured it and what the results were.
20.	How do I develop a qualitative standard?	A qualitative standard is one which measures the quality of the work product rather than the amount of work product or the timeliness of its delivery. For example, a qualitative standard might read: "work products require no substantial re-writes or edits." As with developing any standard, start with discussing it with your employee and, if possible, together develop a tool or job aid to flesh it out.
21.	Is the 75/25 awards money split necessary? Can that be changed?	It's an agency decision so it can be changed, but we do want to ensure the bulk of our awards funds go to ratings based awards as required by OPM.

22.	What is the awards policy for this year? It needs to be tweaked for this year and the future. Will you address?	In the next few months we will be reviewing the current awards policy and making changes where necessary.
23.	We need continuity over the whole process.	Yes, this is crucial. The agency has established a Performance Management Team, with representatives from all levels in FSA, to help with this. At the state level, the process starts with the SED communicating his/her expectations to the workforce, and continues with constant communication between offices on all aspects of performance management
24.	Support for Opportunities To Improve (OTI's)	Employee Relations is committed to provide all the support necessary on OTI's
25.	Any EEO complaints?	There has not been a noticeable change either way since we moved to the 5-tiered system.
26.	Employees need to play their role. It is hard to get the employees to buy in.	Employees do have a vital role in a successful performance management program. Again, communication is the key to success. Involve employees at every stage of the process. Suggest that they take the nonsupervisory performance management course that is available in AgLearn.
27.	We need a common understanding of the definition of Outstanding, Superior and Fully Successful.	Don't think in terms of Superior or Outstanding – these are summary rating levels that will shake out with the final ratings. Think in terms of the 3 element rating levels – Meets, Exceeds, and Does Not Meet. Fully Successful means the employee is doing everything that is expected of them. Tying expectations to measurable goals that have been cascaded down from organizational goals should help with this because organizational goals are consistent across the state and are usually clear and specific.
28.	We need constant communication for motivation of our employees. Performance Management must be a motivational tool.	Exactly right!
29.	What is Fully Successful?	It is meeting the goals established in the performance plan. Fully Successful means the employee is doing everything that is expected of them. Tying expectations the measurable goals that have been cascaded down from organizational goals should help with this because organizational goals are

		consistent across the state and are usually clear and specific.
30.	What goes beyond that?	There are two ways to approach this: (1) take the measurable goals laid out in the performance plan and simply say that anything that numerically goes beyond those is Exceeds. For example, if the Fully Successful goal is to produce 15-20 widgets per day on average, then any average more than 20 would be Exceeds; (2) establish expectations that go beyond the goals in the plan. For example, if the Fully Successful goal is to produce 6 reports per quarter with minimal errors and within established timeframes, the Exceeds goal might be to develop a more efficient way of producing and delivering these reports. The key is to communicate all expectations at the beginning of the appraisal cycle, as clearly and concisely as possible. Most supervisors know in their minds what exceeding expectations looks like – the trick is to communicate this clearly to the employee.
31.	Can the majority of the people be Superior?	Yes, if that's how it falls out. However, don't compare employee ratings with each other and don't look at your ratings distribution and make changes to individual ratings. Again, don't think in terms of Superior or Outstanding – these are summary rating levels that will shake out with the final ratings. Think in terms of the 3 element rating levels – Meets, Exceeds, and Does Not Meet. The expectation is that most people will be Fully Successful – doing the job they are paid to do and meeting all expectations. A relatively small number of people will exceed expectations in some/all of their element. These will be the people with the Superior and Outstanding ratings. If you are finding that most of your employees are Superior/Outstanding, consider re-looking at your performance expectations as they may be too low.
32.	Can we ever be uniform in this?	With 14,000 employees and 3,000 supervisors, probably not. But we should work towards as much consistency as possible.
33.	Can we change this from Performance Management to Managing Performance?	Yes, if you feel that works better.
34.	How can supervisors pre-plan everything affecting the performance in advance? How will the "performance contract" cover	While you should strive to achieve these things, in reality you just can't pre-plan everything nor can the plan include everything. Measurable standards are imperative. Make it a joint plan between the employee and the supervisor.

	everything?	Remember that the performance plan is a living document that can and should be changed as circumstances change. It helps if you try to focus on the most important things instead of everything.
35.	Does this Performance Management system create an adversarial relationship between supervisors?	It shouldn't because we are all working towards the same goals – serving our customers as best we can. Agency managers, such as SEDs should take the lead here, setting the bar to ensure coordination and cooperation between supervisors.
36.	What is the relationship between Elements and Standards?	Elements are composed of standards (three or more standards per element). Elements describe broad tasks to be accomplished whereas standards are the "meat" describing specific expectations.
37.	How do we handle changes during the rating period? Items not included in the performance plans?	Performance plans should always reflect the work to be done, so change them whenever necessary. Remember that the employee must be under the plan for at least 90 days before you can rate them, so don't fiddle too much near the end of the rating period, but keep the plans "current" as much as possible.
38.	How can I say you are not superior after you have met all the list standards?	Don't think in terms of Superior or Outstanding – these are summary rating levels that will shake out with the final ratings. Think in terms of the 3 element rating levels – Meets, Exceeds, and Does Not Meet. Meeting all your standards makes you Fully Successful. This needs to be communicated to the employee at the start of the game.
39.	How does cascading alignment work?	It starts at the top, at the agency level, where overall strategic goals are established (you can find these in the FSA's Strategic Plan). These goals are then broken down and assigned to organizational sub-units within FSA, such as Farm Programs and Farm Loan Programs. These sub-units then break their goals down further and assign them to their sub-units. This "cascading" process continues until you reach the front line employee, who will be given goals that can be traced all the way back to the FSA level through all the levels in between.
40.	What is the purpose of the Results Statement? Isn't it redundant if the standards are clear?	It was intended as a tool to help focus. Create your results statement first, then write the standard. This is a temporary requirement. Once we are familiar with the system, the results statement requirement will be removed.

41.	Clarifying what is Exceeds is a repeated issue.	Be sure to define both ends of the Fully Successful standard – the minimum and the maximum to meet expectations. Exceeding the maximum end should lead to an Exceeds.
42.	Can we put things in standards that are not in the employee's control?	No, period.
43.	Can we use percentages in standards?	Yes, however, percentages can be difficult to track because you have to track everything the employee does in that area. Steer clear of percentages unless you have a great tracking system.
44.	Does there need to be consistency on the number of standards in an element?	While not a requirement, similar positions should have a similar number of standards in their common elements. For example, if all PTs in an office have the customer service element, they should all have roughly the same number of standards in that element. We don't recommend you have many more than the minimum 3 standards because of the time constraints in measuring them.
45.	What do we use for monitoring?	Emails, task reports, Excel documents, counts. Also, be sure to document when you catch employees doing things well. Getting customer feedback is a good way to assess performance as well.
46.	How do we handle poor performance?	Focus on how to improve the performance. As always, communication is the key. However, when performance is not improving, work closely with the AO/EO and Employee Relations in addressing the continued poor performance.
47.	Alignment Guidance	Section Two of the Advanced Supervisory Course/Desk Guide has detailed guidance on this.