Common Rating Errors and How to Avoid Them

When observing and scoring a principal's or assistant principal's job performance, evaluators can easily make errors that reduce the accuracy and objectivity of the ratings. These errors also can limit the validity, fairness, and reliability of ratings. For accurate performance appraisal, it is essential for evaluators to minimize these errors as much as possible.

Following is a list of several common rating errors. In addition to a brief definition of each error, this list provides some general suggestions for minimizing their impact on evaluator scoring. Please examine these errors and refer back to them periodically during your scoring to avoid making these errors.

Central Tendency
Definition: A rater evaluates the principal or assistant using points on the middle of the scale and avoids extremely high or low ratings.

How to avoid this error: Make sure to pay careful attention to the behavioral anchors that define job performance at each scale point. Compare information about a principal's or assistant principal's performance with these behavioral examples. Also, keep in mind that behavioral anchors are examples. Thus, if a principal or assistant principal does not display every single behavior for a particular rating, this situation does not prevent you from using that rating.

Contrast Effect
Definition: A rater directly compares the performance of one principal or assistant principal to the performance of another principal or assistant principal. This contrast effect is exacerbated when the performance levels of the compared principals or assistant principals differ significantly. This effect may lead to higher ratings for above-average principals or assistant principals and lower ratings for poorer performing principals or assistant principals.

How to avoid this error: When making performance ratings, do not compare principals or assistant principals. Instead, compare the performance of principals or assistant principals to the anchors on the scoring scale.

Focusing on One or Two Incidents
Definition: A rater bases ratings on a few particularly effective or ineffective principal or assistant principal behaviors. As a result, ratings of performance are based on just a few instances rather than on the full range of that principal's or assistant principal's behavior.

How to avoid this error: Although some principal or assistant principal behaviors—such as very effective or very ineffective behaviors—may stand out in your mind, remember to take into account the full range of performance you observe. Taking detailed notes and frequently referring to the performance dimensions, especially the behavioral indicators, can help to avoid this error.

Frame of Reference

Definition: A rater's personal performance standards inappropriately take the place of the job requirements outlined by the school or district.

How to avoid this error: Carefully examine the rating scale for each dimension. In particular, you should focus on the behavioral anchors associated with each performance level. Prior to making your ratings, review the official job description for the principal or assistant principal position. Try to avoid incorporating your personal standards or feelings about what should constitute effective job performance.

Halo Error

Definition: A rater allows ratings on one behavioral indicator to influence ratings on another behavioral indicator.

How to avoid this error: Remember that behavioral indicators are independent. Therefore, your ratings on one behavioral indicator should not influence ratings on another behavioral indicator. Instead, consider a principal's or assistant principal's performance on each behavioral indicator separately. Use only information that is relevant to the behavioral indicator that you are rating.

High Potential Error

Definition: A rater gives higher ratings to a principal or assistant principal than he or she actually deserves. The higher rating is given because the rater believes that the principal or assistant principal has the potential to one day be an excellent principal. Alternatively, this error also could occur when a rater believes that the principal or assistant principal has low potential; in this situation, the rater gives that principal or assistant principal lower ratings than he or she deserves.

How to avoid this error: Remember to consider *all* instances of an employee's *actual* job performance. Ratings should be made based only on an employee's behavior. Ratings should not be made based on an employee's anticipated improvements or declines.

Leniency and Severity

Definition: A rater gives mostly high (lenient) or low (severe) ratings to a principal or assistant principal in a manner that is inconsistent with the principal's or assistant principal's actual performance.

How to avoid this error: Make sure to pay careful attention to the scale anchors when making your ratings. Also, review the anchors in order to understand how performance is defined at each scale point. You should not try to intentionally be an "easy" or "hard" rater.

Recency Bias

Definition: A rater is inclined to remember recent events better than those that occurred in the past. In this situation, the rater often places greater emphasis or weight on what a principal or assistant principal has done most recently. This error results in ratings that are often based on a smaller sample of work.

How to avoid this error: When making performance ratings, consider all of the principal's or or assistant principal's performance over the entire rating time period. This approach will help to ensure that a complete group of behaviors is considered. Remind yourself that the level of performance at the beginning of the time period is just as important as more recent performance.

Similar-to-Me Bias

Definition: A rater provides higher ratings to principals or assistant principals who are similar to themselves, and lower ratings to principals or assistant principals who are dissimilar. A related bias occurs when raters allow how much they like or dislike a principal or assistant principal to influence the principal's or assistant principal's performance ratings.

How to avoid this error: Avoid incorporating personal feelings or perceptions about a principal or assistant principal into your performance ratings. Only actual job performance should be used to make ratings, and other pieces of information should not be used.