

Module 6:

Common Rater Errors and Biases



Things work out best for those who make the best of how things work out." John Wooden

The purpose of internship:

For most students, internship is the most significant experience of their social work education. The internship experience serves to develop each student's professional capacity and exposes students in the values, goals and skills of social work.

In providing the opportunity for intensive field-based learning, the field agency makes a major contribution to the development of responsible social work practitioners.

The purpose of internship (cont.):

During the placement experience, the field instructor becomes the most important teacher, aside from the clients, in the student's day-to-day learning.

The field instructor coordinates the student's overall experience and helps the student integrate the various pieces of the internship. The student/FI relationship is primarily an educational one in which both parties commit to the student's learning of skills, values, and knowledge of social work.

Internships are learning experiences:

Evaluating interns is an important part of the internship process. Evaluations for interns identify the lasting value of the student/FI relationship, hopefully affirming that it was a good experience for both the intern and the agency.

Ideally, the goal is to coach, mentor, educate, and guide the student towards success. An honest, unbiased evaluation of the students' performance is a tool to ensure the students' success.

Common Rater Errors and Biases



Rater errors are errors in judgment that occur in a systematic manner when an individual observes and evaluates another.

Personal perceptions and biases may influence how we evaluate an individual's performance. What makes these errors so difficult to correct is that the observer is usually unaware that they are making them.

Since we are all human, it is common to make "errors", especially when assessing someone else's behavior and performance. These errors are reflective of our unconscious biases toward those we are evaluating. These biases can give an intern an unfair advantage or disadvantage over others in their peer group.

The next few slides reviews the most common performance rater errors and biases.

The Halo/Horns Effect:



This is when a field instructor really likes or dislikes an intern and allows their personal feelings about the intern influence their performance ratings of them, across all competencies.

The halo effect is also when a field instructor allows one positive work factor you like affect your overall assessment of performance. By contrast, letting one work factor or behavior you dislike color your opinion of other factors is the horns effect.



Leniency Bias/Error:

Leniency error is the tendency to evaluate all interns as outstanding and to give inflated ratings rather than true assessments of performance. This can happen when an FI over-emphasizes either positive or negative behaviors.

Reasons that an FI might do this include avoiding confrontations or feeling that by giving the intern a high rating, they will work harder to live up to the rating. Or the opposite, by giving them a lower rating, they will rise to the occasion.

Strictness/Severity Error:

Here, the field instructor tends to rate an intern lower than what their performance warrants. A potential cause of the error could be the use of unrealistic standards of comparison, such as the FI rating an intern against themselves.

In this scenario, the FI forgets that it took time to reach the level of performance they operate at, and an intern would not have had enough time to develop skills to that level. The tendency to rate all people at the low end of the scale and are overly critical of performance.

False Attribution and Perceived Meaning:

The tendency to attribute bad performance to internal causes and good performance to external causes. For example, if an intern performs well, it's because the intern had help, such as receiving good supervision or help from a preceptor or field instructor; and if the intern performs badly, it's because the intern did something wrong, such as procrastinate.

Perceived meaning becomes an issue when a field instructor does not agree on the meaning of the rating criteria. For example, one FI may perceive an intern's constant reporting of problems as initiative, while another FI may feel this behavior demonstrates dependence on supervisory assistance instead of initiative.

Recency Error:

Recency error is the tendency to allow more recent incidents (either effective or ineffective) of an intern's behavior to carry too much weight in evaluation of performance over the course of the semester (or academic year). This usually occurs due to a lack of documentation of the intern's performance over the course of the entire semester and/or academic year.

This can be extreme on both ends of the spectrum. Either an intern just finishing a major project successfully or an intern may have had a negative incident right before the performance appraisal process and it is on the forefront of the FI's thoughts about that intern. It is for this reason that keeping accurate records of performance is important throughout the year to refer back to during performance appraisal time is so important.

Stereotyping:

Stereotyping is the tendency to apply the same generalizations to all members of a specific social/cultural/economic group(s). The intern is classified or evaluated in a certain way because of apparent membership in a particular category of people. The field instructor believes that people in this category share certain characteristics which may be viewed either favorably or unfavorably. Common stereotypes are based on race, age, religion and gender. When an FI holds a stereotype, it is easy to interpret behavior according to that belief.

Additional Rater Errors and Biases

Central tendency error: tendency to avoid making “extreme” judgments of an intern’s performance resulting in rating all interns in the middle part of a scale. This can happen either when a field instructor is not comfortable with conflict and avoids low marks to avoid dealing with behavioral issues or when an FI intentionally forces all interns to the middle of the scale, again in order to avoid addressing concerns.

High Potential Error: Confusing potential with performance.

Grouping: Excusing below-standard performance because it is widespread; “everyone does it”.

Additional Rater Errors and Biases (Cont.)

First impression error: field instructor's tendency to let their first impression of an intern's performance carry too much weight in evaluation of performance over an entire rating period. For example: a new intern joining the organization and performing at high levels during their "honeymoon" period and then possibly losing some of that initial momentum. All the while the field instructor continues to view and rate the student in the same way.

Similar-to-me error: field instructor's tendency is biased in performance evaluation toward those interns seen as similar to the FI themselves. We can all relate to people who are like us but should not let our ability to relate to someone influence our rating of their overall performance. Keep in mind that you have years of education and experience as a foundation whereas your intern is just starting their professional career.

Questions to Ask Yourself to Avoid Rater Errors

Am I basing my rating on documentation of my observations of the intern's behavior, or am I making judgments based on my perceptions?

Am I looking at each of this intern's competencies separately, or have I generalized their performance?

Have I looked at this intern's competencies over time, or have I generalized according to initial perceptions of them?

Have I recognized any biases I may have so I do not let them influence my judgments?

Have I rated this intern on their actual behavior or have I rated them compared to other individuals/inters?

Have I sought out feedback from other working directly with the intern? Have I consulted with the field liaison re: my concerns about the intern?

How to avoid rater errors

Good performance documentation is the first key to overcoming rating errors. Written notes, regularly updated, can also serve as a source of specific information for coaching and counseling and as required documentation for progressive discipline cases.

The second key is clear definition of internship objectives and performance expectations. If both the field instructor and the intern have a clear understanding of what is expected, the entire performance evaluation process becomes much more effective.

How to avoid rater errors (Cont.)

Bring in the troops. Remember that field liaisons are a source of support not only for students, but for field instructors as well. Additionally, they provide advocacy, mediation, consultation, problem-solving and guidance to field instructors when issues, concerns or questions arise.

How to avoid rater errors (Cont.)

Keep in mind that the internship experience is primarily about learning, growing, and expanding the intern's overall professional experiences.

The goal is to use the evaluation as a coaching learning tool—essentially, as a vehicle to inspire communication about work-related issues and their overall performance.

We ultimately have a responsibility to educate and invest in the future professionals who will be joining the social work field.

References

Information about common rating errors has been adapted from Richard Grote's The Complete Guide to Performance Appraisal, New York: American Management Association, 1996 and Howard University's website on its Performance Evaluation Program (www.hr.howard.edu/totcomp/PEP).