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Precepts for Foreign Service Promotion Boards

A Mandatory Reference for ADS 463

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PRECEPTS FOR FOREIGN SERVICE PROMOTION BOARDS

A. Purpose

These precepts (including the Foreign Service/Senior Foreign Service Skills Framework) prescribe the procedures and criteria to be used by Foreign Service (FS) Promotion Boards for determining which Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) will be:

- High-ranked (recommended and numerically rank ordered for promotion)
- Mid-ranked (meeting the standards of performance for their class)
- Low-ranked (failing to meet the standards of performance for their class)

B. Information Provided to Boards

All FS employees in classes FS-04 to FS-01 who meet the promotion eligibility and review requirements established in [ADS 463.3.1.1](#) are required to prepare and submit promotion packages for review by FS Promotion Boards by the prescribed deadline. Promotion Boards must base their decisions solely on the current year promotion package and the other documents included in the employee's five-year performance evaluation file (see [ADS 463 3.1.9](#)).

1) Performance Evaluation File

The five-year performance evaluation file is used for both promotion and relative performance reviews.

The performance evaluation file for FS consists of the current year promotion package plus performance information from up to four prior years. Prior-year information will include Annual Accomplishment Records (AARs) and associated Operating Unit Context Statements, Annual Performance Evaluations (APEs). Additional information included in the five-year performance evaluation file includes: current year Multisource Ratings (MSRs), the employee's training record, awards, assignment history, disciplinary actions (decision letters), and language scores.

2) Foreign Service/Senior Foreign Service Skills Framework

The FS Boards must refer to the [FS/SFS Skills Framework](#) and the criteria established in Section D2 below when assessing FSOs for promotion. The FS/SFS Skills Framework illustrates how expected proficiency levels in the core skills change as the employee moves up the career ladder. Behavioral examples for each subskill are provided at four levels: Apprentice (FS-06 to FS-04), Journey (FS-03/FS-02), Master (FS-01), and Teacher (SFS). These examples, combined with the core skill and subskill definitions in the framework, provide a common frame of reference for Board member deliberations and discussions as they integrate information from multiple sources into their assessments of candidates' core skills.

3) Rating Scales

To facilitate and standardize the assessment and rating process, Board members receive rating scales to guide **their assessments**. Directions are fully explained in the training that all Boards receive prior to starting their deliberations.

C. Equality of Consideration (Inadmissible Comments)

It is Agency policy and federal law to neither discriminate against, nor confer advantage to, any employee, directly or indirectly, on the basis of protected class or activity. Decisions regarding employee promotion, tenure, performance pay, and awards must be based solely on merit.

USAID employees, Rating Officials, Reviewing Officials, and Approving Officials must not submit documents containing inadmissible comments, or other non-merit related information. Specifically:

References to members of the USAID workforce. It is not permitted to reference the protected class or activity of specific and identifiable members of the USAID workforce, including oneself.

References to specific groups or protected classes (as defined in the list below).

References to specific groups or protected classes are allowed when describing efforts to promote a diverse, inclusive, equitable, and accessible workplace, so long as those references do not violate merit-based personnel practices or identify specific persons, including oneself, i.e., employees may not reference their own protected class.

References to Employee Non-labor Organizations (NLOs). Employee NLOs, such as Employee Resource Groups, are non-federal entities. Pursuant to [ADS 115.3.1\(e\)\(4\)](#), employees are prohibited by law from being granted official duty time or administrative leave for NLO-related matters, including attendance at NLO-sponsored events and meetings. This prohibition does not apply to Agency-sponsored events or events associated with nationally-observed History and Heritage Months. Employees are permitted to reference engagement with, or membership in, a specific and identified NLO **only** if it is part of their official, assigned or collateral position duties. Such references may not specify the employee's own protected status or the protected status of specific and identifiable members of the USAID workforce.

References to working groups or councils established by U.S. Embassies or USAID Operating Units. Reference to participation in specific and identified federal entities such as U.S. Embassy or USAID Operating Unit groups such as DEIA Councils are permitted, but employees may not identify their own protected status or the protected status of specific and identifiable members of the USAID workforce.

References to U.S. Embassy-run groups. References to participation in U.S. Embassy-run groups such as the Post Housing Board or Commissary Board are permitted.

References to USAID partners and beneficiaries. References to the protected status of USAID partners and program beneficiaries are permitted.

Protected classes and activities include:

1. Race, color, national origin, sex (including pregnancy, gender identity, sexual orientation, or transgender status), age, religion, or genetic information;
2. Geographic or educational affiliation within the United States;
3. Retirement, resignation, or other separation plans;
4. Disability status, whether a reasonable accommodation has been requested or provided due to a disability, the nature/type of any reasonable accommodation requested or provided, and medical information (including information regarding alcoholism, drug abuse, rehabilitation efforts, or medical condition that affects job performance or ability to accept overseas assignments). However, reference to disability as it relates to the work of the Agency (without identifying individual employees) is permitted.
5. Marital or parental status; references to spouse, partner, or family;
6. Veteran status;
7. Participation or non-participation in union activities, either as a representative of the union or as a bargaining unit member;
8. Political affiliation;
9. Filing, initiating, involvement in, or participation in any grievance, Equal Employment Opportunity or Harassment complaint, or other formal complaint investigative or adjudicative process;
10. Reluctance or refusal, and any known reason for doing so, to work voluntary overtime;
11. Leave record, *except absence without leave (AWOL)* (consultation with HCTM is required). This includes the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA), Leave without Pay (LWOP), and leave for medical reasons;
12. Using or not using workplace flexibilities (e.g., telework, or away from a post on authorized/ordered departure) or negative reference to the impact of a detail/TDY assignment on the employee's ability to complete their regular duties. If the employee's work supported the workplace flexibilities of other employees, then references to that performance is acceptable;

13. Use of the dissent channel or direct or indirect reference to, or consideration of, judgments in dissent channel messages as a basis for an adverse evaluation of performance or potential (*however, expressions of dissenting views on policy that are outside the dissent channel and that raise substantive questions of judgment relative to the Foreign Service Skills Matrix may be discussed in an evaluation, with specific instances cited*);
14. "Whistleblowing," or the protected disclosure of information. This includes statements by an employee who reasonably believes they are providing evidence of an activity constituting a violation of law, rules, or regulations, or gross mismanagement, gross waste of funds, abuse of authority, or a substantial and specific danger to public health or safety;
15. Decisions or proposals concerning disciplinary action (this does not include references by managers to describe efforts to improve the performance or conduct of a subordinate or otherwise address performance or conduct issues in a manner relevant to the skills matrix);
16. Negative or derogatory discussion of another employee's (including predecessor's) performance (this does not include references by managers to describe efforts to improve the performance or conduct of a subordinate or otherwise address performance or conduct issues in a manner relevant to the skills matrix); and
17. References to private U.S. citizens by name.

Foreign Service Promotion Board, Performance Standards Board, and Tenure Board members must be alert to potentially discriminatory, biased, or non-merit based comments in employee files and report such findings to HCTM immediately. HCTM must verify whether the comments are admissible or inadmissible. If a comment is determined to be inadmissible, the Board will be instructed to ignore the inadmissible comments in the file and not allow such comments to influence their assessments of candidates. If a Board member believes another Board member is violating this policy in their review of an employee's file, the member must immediately bring the matter to the attention of HCTM for appropriate action. HCTM/Employee Labor Relations (ELR) must also consider inadmissible comments for potential disciplinary action.

D. Guidance for Promotion Reviews

1) General Guidance for Reviews

Board recommendations for FS promotions must be based on its ratings on the promotion decision factors, the secondary factor as appropriate, and the composite picture of the FSO that emerges from these ratings. Only information included in the files provided to the Boards may be considered in the Boards' deliberations. Demonstrated exemplary

performance and exceptional skills relative to others in one's class are required of all those recommended for promotion.

Board members must apply the relevant criteria as fairly as possible, discuss their views where differences exist, and exercise their judgment to the fullest extent of their wisdom and experience.

2) Framework for Developing a Composite Picture for Promotion Ranking

FS Promotion Boards, following the procedures outlined in ADS 463, apply their collective experience as well as their individual judgments to develop a composite picture of an employee's performance and potential from which they can make decisions concerning ratings, numerical rankings, and promotion recommendations. FS Promotion Boards use the criteria below and their associated rating scales to rate each promotion candidate. After using the rating scales associated with the primary factors and establishing a composite score for each promotion candidate. Boards assign high-ranked, mid-ranked, or low-ranked ratings to each candidate. All candidates recommended for promotion are high-ranked and receive a preliminary numerical rank ordering based on their composite score. Candidates meeting the standards of performance for their class are mid-ranked. Candidates not meeting the standards of performance for their class, per guidance in section E. below, are low-ranked. Boards must develop their composite picture of candidates using the following primary factors:

Primary Factors

1) Understanding of and ability to advance the Agency's mission.

Boards must consider an employee's contributions to the Agency through demonstrated success in various and increasingly responsible assignments within and outside the Agency. Employees are expected to show a deeper understanding of the Agency's objectives and how these evolve; how the Agency works (both in the U.S. and overseas); and how individual performance contributes to the achievement of the Agency's mission and U.S. foreign assistance objectives. (Note: The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended, outlined in Sections 101 and 102 U.S. development assistance policy and the principles to be followed in administering development assistance. These emphasize the responsibility of developing countries to successfully marshal their own resources to lead their own development with participation of their people in decision-making; the U.S. supporting such efforts and working collaboratively with developing countries and other partners to mobilize public and private resources to cover gaps; and of assistance being based on the needs and capabilities of the recipient country and used to strengthen this capacity to achieve self-sustaining growth). FSOs also are expected to demonstrate increasing effectiveness in contributing to the Agency's mission and objectives, acting individually, as a member of a team (e.g., interagency, across Bureaus/Independent Offices (B/IOs)), or in partnership with local actors and other key external stakeholders.

2) Proficiency and consistency in demonstrating each of **the required** FS/SFS Core Skills **defined in the FS/SFS Skills Framework**.

Promotion Boards must focus on information in the promotion package relevant to the employee's skills and competencies. The FS/SFS Core Skills are defined in the FS/SFS Skills Framework, and employees with the greatest potential to be successful at the next level will have demonstrated both mastery of skills required at the current level and the ability to meet some of the skill proficiency expectations of the next higher level. Backstop competencies are referenced in the Technical and Substantive Expertise subskill under the Results and Impact Focused core skill. Behavior resulting in a disciplinary action should be considered when Professionalism scores are assigned, since the definition of professionalism includes "Conducts self and accomplishes work in a manner that is consistent with the highest ethical standards and USAID values."

Tiebreaking **For the High-Ranked** List

Once each Promotion Board has provided their **high-ranked** list to HCTM staff, HCTM provides Boards with the three previous years' **high-ranked** lists from each Board. The Promotion Boards must adjust the **numerical** rank order of employees recommended for promotion when two or more **high-ranked** candidates are tied. The Promotion Board may only use the three previous years' **high-ranked** lists as well as their assessment of the secondary factor described below to break ties. The Promotion Board cannot remove or add FSOs to the **high-ranked** list based on prior-year **ratings**.

Secondary Factor

Once the Boards have identified employees with **high-ranked** ratings based on the primary factors, Boards will then consider the secondary factor—past and current assignments/experiences that may enhance an employee's ability to add value to the Agency in the future. Illustrative examples of the kinds of past and current assignments and/or experience that may enhance an employee's ability to add value to the Agency in the future are listed below:

- Assignments in two or more geographic and/or functional Bureaus in USAID/Washington or overseas;
- Special assignments including, but not limited to, task forces, details, and councils;
- USAID-related outside assignment such as to other Federal agencies (e.g., Department of State, National Security Council, Department of Defense's Military Commands), Congress, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations;
- Professional development and training assignments;

- Assignments in hardship, conflict, post-conflict and crisis environments; and
- Work related to uniquely challenging situations such as start-ups, downsizing, closeouts, and phase-outs that are necessitated by changing international and political climates.

Boards may adjust their preliminary **numerical** rank order of the **high-ranked** group based on the secondary factor, as well as on the information obtained from the **high-ranked** lists from each Board for the past three years.

Per [ADS 463.3.1.1](#), employees are ineligible to receive a **high-ranked** rating if they did not submit or submitted late their documentation and their justification was deemed insufficient by HCTM.

E. Guidance for Relative Performance Reviews

In reviewing FSOs' performance evaluation files, FS Boards must also consider an individual's performance relative to the performance of other employees in their class who are eligible for promotion in the current year. This is a distinct analysis from the analysis a supervisor makes as to whether an employee's performance is satisfactory or unsatisfactory in the employee's particular job, meaning that an employee could be satisfactorily rated by their supervisor, but receive a **low-ranked** rating relative to the employee's peers. If careful examination of the files of those ranked at or near the bottom of their class suggests inadequacies in the knowledge, skills, abilities, values, or other factors expected of individuals at that class, such as those related to conduct, the Board may assign those individuals a **low-ranked** rating. All FSOs who receive a **low-ranked rating** receive written feedback from the board in a formal memorandum, describing the specific areas where they were deemed to be performing below expected levels or did not meet the skill proficiency expectations illustrated in the FS/SFS Skills Framework. The memorandum may also provide specific recommendations for professional development. The board submits this memorandum to HCTM/CPE, who provides a copy to HCTM's Foreign Service Center, Assignments and Career Counseling Division (HCTM/FSC/ACC) and HCTM's Office of Employee and Labor Relations (ELR). The HCTM/FSC/ACC shares the memorandum with the employee no later than the date the **promotion board review summaries** are issued.

Per [ADS 464, Foreign Service Performance-Based Actions](#), career employees who receive two **low-ranked** ratings in a five-year period **must** be referred to the Performance Standards Board (PSB).