



November 2024

MILITARY OFFICER PERFORMANCE

Actions Needed to Fully Incorporate Performance Evaluation Key Practices

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-106618](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Military service performance evaluation systems provide necessary performance information for approximately 215,000 active duty commissioned officers across the Department of Defense (DOD). They also support decisions about officer promotions and placements. These decisions affect the composition and quality of the military's current and future leadership.

Public Law 117-263 includes a provision for GAO to review the military services' officer performance evaluation systems. This report examines (1) the extent the military services' active duty officer performance evaluation systems incorporate key practices for performance evaluation, and (2) how officer performance evaluations inform promotion board determinations and support officer development.

GAO developed 11 key practices for performance evaluation; reviewed military service policies, manuals, forms, and other documentation; conducted nongeneralizable interviews with 19 promotion board members and 31 active duty officers; and interviewed DOD officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making a total of 20 recommendations, including that three services develop a training plan and align performance expectations with organizational goals; two services address communication of performance expectations and competencies and require feedback; and all four services develop a plan to evaluate their systems. DOD generally agreed with our recommendations.

View [GAO-25-106618](#). For more information, contact Kristy Williams at (404) 679-1893 or williamsk@gao.gov.

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What GAO Found

Out of 11 key practices for performance evaluation, all four military service systems fully incorporated the same five key practices and partially incorporated one key practice. The service systems varied in their implementation of the remaining five practices. Some fully incorporated the practices, some partially incorporated them, and most did not incorporate one practice.

Assessment of the Military Services' Officer Performance Evaluation Systems against GAO's Key Practices for Performance Evaluation

Eleven Key Practices		Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force
Design	Establish and communicate a clear purpose for the system	●	●	●	●
	Allow for personnel to be directly involved in the process	●	●	●	●
	Create and update guidance on procedures for the system	●	●	●	●
	Provide training on procedures for the evaluation system	◐	◐	●	◐
Implementation	Align performance expectations with organizational goals	●	○	○	○
	Communicate performance expectations and competencies	●	◐	◐	●
	Evaluate performance based on relevant competencies	●	●	●	●
	Make meaningful distinctions in performance	◐	●	●	●
	Conduct performance evaluations in a timely fashion	●	●	●	●
Evaluation	Provide timely and actionable feedback on performance	◐	●	◐	●
	Regularly evaluate the performance evaluation system	◐	◐	◐	◐

● Fully incorporated ◐ Partially incorporated ○ Not incorporated

Source: GAO analysis of military service documentation and information. | GAO-25-106618

Note: Fully incorporated: GAO found complete evidence that satisfied the key practice.

Partially incorporated: GAO found evidence that satisfied some portion of the key practice.

Not incorporated: GAO found no evidence that satisfied the key practice.

For example, GAO found that all four service systems fully incorporated the key practice that organizations should establish and communicate a clear purpose for the performance evaluation system by stating the purpose of their systems in relevant policies. In contrast, GAO found that three service systems did not incorporate the practice that organizations should align individual performance expectations with organizational goals because their systems' policies neither align performance expectations with organizational goals nor direct rating officials to do so. By fully incorporating all 11 key practices, the services will have better assurance that their performance evaluation systems are designed, implemented, and regularly evaluated to ensure effectiveness.

The 19 promotion board members and 31 active duty officers GAO interviewed provided differing perspectives on the value of information in officer performance evaluation reports and on the extent to which reports support officer development. Promotion board members stated that evaluation reports provided sufficient information to inform their decisions about which officers to recommend for promotion. Some active duty officers stated that the reports provide a clear and relevant tool for assessing performance and supporting officer development. Conversely, others stated that factors such as misused or overused narrative may prevent a clear picture of officer performance areas in need of growth.

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Abbreviations

DOD	Department of Defense
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
OPM	Office of Personnel Management

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November 13, 2024

Congressional Committees

Effectively evaluating the performance of active duty military officers and supporting officer development are essential to cultivating an officer corps with the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities to lead the military of the future. To this end, the military services operate and oversee individual systems to evaluate the performance of approximately 215,000 active duty commissioned officers. The military services also provide promotion selection boards with performance information to support officer promotion and placement decisions.¹ These decisions carry important national security implications, affecting both the composition of the military and the quality of its current and future leadership.

According to military service policies, the services' performance evaluation systems broadly serve two purposes.² The first purpose is to communicate performance standards and expectations and evaluate officer performance. The second purpose is to support personnel management decisions—such as selecting qualified personnel for promotion and command—by providing promotion board members with a long-term cumulative record of officer performance and potential. Within the Department of Defense (DOD), responsibilities for executing and overseeing the military services' performance evaluation systems are dispersed across military department offices and service-specific personnel commands or centers.

The James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 includes a provision for us to review the military services' officer

¹According to Department of Defense (DOD) Instruction 1320.14, a promotion selection board is a board of commissioned officers convened under 10 U.S.C § 611(a) to evaluate and recommend qualified officers on the Active Duty List for promotion to a higher grade, or a board of commissioned officers convened under 10 U.S.C. § 14101(a) to evaluate and recommend qualified officers on the Reserve Active Status List for promotion to a higher grade. DOD Instruction 1320.14, *DOD Commissioned Officer Promotion Program Procedures* (Dec. 16, 2020)

²Army Regulation 623-3, *Evaluation Reporting System* (June 14, 2019); U.S. Navy, Bureau of Naval Personnel (BUPERS Instruction 1610.10F Change Transmittal 1, *Navy Performance Evaluation System* (Aug. 18, 2022); Marine Corps Order 1610.7B, *Performance Evaluation System (PES)* (June 5, 2023); Air Force Instruction 36-2406, *Officer and Enlisted Evaluations Systems* (Aug. 4, 2023) (incorporating Air Force Guidance Memorandum 2024-01, Jan. 17, 2024); and Space Force Instruction 36-2401, *Guardian Evaluation Systems* (Jan. 17, 2024).

performance evaluation systems against best practices for performance evaluation, as well as the information provided to promotion boards and to officers as developmental feedback.³ This report examines (1) the extent to which the military services' active duty officer performance evaluation systems incorporate key practices for performance evaluation, and (2) how officer performance evaluations inform promotion board determinations and support officer development.

For our first objective, we developed 11 key practices for performance evaluation through a literature review of scholarly and peer-reviewed publications on performance evaluation and key practices used by public- and private-sector organizations. We assessed the military services' officer performance evaluation system policies, forms, and other documentation against these key practices to determine the extent to which each service's system incorporated the 11 key practices.⁴ To make these determinations, two GAO analysts independently evaluated relevant documentation for evidence of each key practice and met to resolve any differences in their respective analyses. In addition, we evaluated some aspects of the military services' performance evaluation systems against *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, including the principles that management define objectives clearly and design control activities to achieve objectives and respond to risks.⁵

For our second objective, we reviewed relevant statutes, DOD policy, and military department and service policies to obtain an understanding of how performance evaluations are intended to inform officer promotion

³Pub. L. No. 117-263, § 509C (2022). The military services use different terms to describe their officer evaluation systems and processes. For example, the Marine Corps uses the terms "fitness report systems" and "fitness reports," while the Army uses "evaluation reporting system" and "officer evaluation report." For the purposes of this review, we will use the terms "performance evaluation system" and "performance evaluation report" to describe the services' officer evaluation processes and reports, respectively.

⁴We excluded the Space Force from our analysis of service evaluation systems against our 11 key practices because the Space Force was in the process of implementing a performance evaluation system during the time of our review. Previously, the Space Force followed the Department of the Air Force's evaluation system since its establishment in 2019.

⁵GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2014).

board determinations and support officer development.⁶ To obtain perspectives on how the military services' officer performance evaluation systems evaluate officer performance, inform promotion board determinations, and support officer development, we conducted nongeneralizable interviews with 19 promotion board members and 31 separate active duty officers. To identify volunteers for these interviews, we obtained lists of promotion board members and other active duty commissioned officers from each of the military services. The lists of promotion board members comprised officers that served on at least one statutory promotion selection board since January 1, 2020. The lists of active duty officers included officers who had (1) received their commission prior to January 1, 2022, and (2) represented a diversity of grade, duty location, occupational specialty, gender, and race, to the extent possible. To ensure representation from each of the military services, we randomly selected participants from each of the services' lists and sent emails to those individuals inviting them to volunteer for an interview. We repeated this process until we achieved at least three volunteers for our promotion board interviews and five volunteers for our officer interviews from each military service. See appendix I and appendix II for our complete questionnaires used to conduct these interviews.

For both objectives, we interviewed cognizant officials on DOD and military service policies and procedures for evaluating active duty commissioned officer performance; on the performance evaluation systems' purpose, design, implementation, and evaluation functions; and on the provision of performance-related information to promotion boards and officers. For a detailed description of our scope and methodology, see appendix III.

We conducted this performance audit from February 2023 to November 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

⁶Defense Officer Personnel Management Act, Pub. L. No. 96-513 (1980) (*codified as amended* in scattered sections of the United States Code). DOD Instruction 1320.13, *Commissioned Officer Promotion Reports* (Apr. 9, 2021); DOD Instruction 1320.14; Army Regulation 623-3; BUPERS Instruction 1610.10F Change Transmittal 1; Marine Corps Order 1610.7B; Air Force Instruction 36-2406; and Space Force Instruction 36-2401.

Background

Performance Evaluation and Management

Performance evaluation is the practice of assessing employee or group performance based on work performed during an appraisal period against the elements and standards in an employee's performance plan and assigning a summary rating of record. Performance evaluation systems are often used to inform and justify organizational decisions, such as promotions, compensation, reassignment, or termination.

Performance evaluation is part of the broader concept of performance management. According to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), performance management is a systematic process by which an agency involves its employees, both as individuals and members of a group, in improving organizational effectiveness in the accomplishment of agency mission and goals. OPM policy identifies five phases of the performance management cycle: (1) planning work and setting expectations; (2) continually monitoring performance; (3) developing the capacity to perform; (4) rating periodically to summarize performance; and (5) rewarding good performance.⁷ Performance evaluation most closely aligns with OPM's fourth phase of the performance management cycle. It also includes steps such as setting expectations and monitoring performance, which align with OPM's first and second phases, respectively.⁸

Between 2003 and 2009, we reported on DOD's efforts to evaluate the performance of its civilian personnel through the design and implementation of two performance management systems: the National Security Personnel System and the Defense Civilian Intelligence

⁷Office of Personnel Management, *A Handbook for Measuring Employee Performance* (Mar. 2017).

⁸According to OPM officials, OPM provides guidance to agencies on performance management, based on the performance management and appraisal systems defined in title 5 of the United States Code, as well as in title 5 of the Code of Federal Regulations, which would be applicable to DOD federal civilian employees. Relatedly, the office's *A Handbook for Measuring Employee Performance* contains guidance on developing federal employee performance plans. See appendix III for additional information on our coordination with OPM as part of this review.

Personnel System.⁹ In that body of work, we reported on the need for appropriate internal safeguards when designing and implementing performance management systems and made 14 recommendations to improve the design and implementation of DOD's systems. We performed the work by assessing these systems against a list of safeguards we developed based on our prior work on performance management practices used by leading public-sector organizations both in the United States and in other countries. As of August 2024, DOD had taken action to address 11 of the recommendations, which we closed as implemented. We closed the remaining three recommendations as not implemented following the 2009 repeal of the National Security Personnel System.¹⁰

Officer Performance Evaluations

The military services have developed and implemented service-specific systems for evaluating and documenting the performance of active duty officers based on characteristics valued by each service at specific points in an officer's career. Within each service's system, rating officials document officer performance on performance evaluation reports, which go into an officer's permanent personnel file.¹¹

Army. According to Army documentation, the Army performance evaluation system is intended to identify the Army's best performers and those with the greatest potential for promotion. The system also facilitates

⁹See GAO, *DOD Civilian Personnel: Intelligence Personnel System Incorporates Safeguards, but Opportunities Exist for Improvement*, [GAO-10-134](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 17, 2009); *Human Capital: Monitoring of Safeguards and Addressing Employee Perceptions Are Key to Implementing a Civilian Performance Management System in DOD*, [GAO-10-102](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 28, 2009); *Human Capital: DOD Needs to Improve Implementation of and Address Employee Concerns about Its National Security Personnel System*, [GAO-08-773](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2008); *Human Capital: DOD Needs Better Internal Controls and Visibility over Costs for Implementing Its National Security Personnel System*, [GAO-07-851](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 16, 2007); *Human Capital: Observations on Final Regulations for DOD's National Security Personnel System*, [GAO-06-227T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 17, 2005); *Defense Transformation: Preliminary Observations on DOD's Proposed Civilian Personnel Reforms*, [GAO-03-717T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 29, 2003); *Defense Transformation: DOD's Proposed Civilian Personnel System and Governmentwide Human Capital Reform*, [GAO-03-741T](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 1, 2003); and *Human Capital: Building on DOD's Reform Effort to Foster Governmentwide Improvements*, [GAO-03-851T](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 4, 2003).

¹⁰Pub. L. No. 111-84, § 1113 (2009).

¹¹The military services use different terms to describe the forms used to document officer performance. For the purposes of this review, we use the term "performance evaluation report" to describe the services' officer performance evaluation forms.

the Army's efforts to maintain discipline, promote leader development and professionalism, and provide feedback to rated officers.

Under the Army's system, officers from Warrant Officer 1 (WO-1) through Brigadier General (O-7) receive performance evaluations.¹² Assessments of officer performance are made by supervisors in a rating relationship with the officer and are conducted for a number of different reasons, including (1) change of duty, (2) change of rater, (3) end of the annual 12-month rating period, (4) a "complete the record" report prior to a selection board, or (5) relief for cause (i.e., early release of an officer from a specific duty or assignment based on performance).

Key roles under the Army's system include the rater, the senior rater, and, in some cases, an intermediate rater and a supplementary reviewer. Specifically, according to Army documentation, the rater is responsible for clearly and concisely communicating the rated officer's most significant achievements and advocating for the officer to the senior rater. The Army's policy for its performance evaluation system requires raters to provide an overall assessment of a rated officer's performance during the rating period.¹³ For the overall performance assessment, a rater selects a check box on the performance evaluation report based on a four-tier rating scale that ranges from "excels" to "unsatisfactory." The check box—used on performance evaluation reports of officers in grades O-1 through O-5—is accompanied by required narrative comments.¹⁴ In comparison, according to Army documentation, the senior rater is the owner of the evaluation and is responsible for ensuring timely completion of the evaluation report. The senior rater also uses a check box combined with narrative to assess the potential of officers in grades O-1 through O-6 and to send a clear message to the promotion boards. Under certain circumstances, a rating chain may also include an intermediate rater—a supervisor in a rated officer's chain of command or supervision between

¹²The military services employ a system of administrative classifications known as pay grades to standardize compensation. The "O" in O-1 stands for "officer," while the "1" indicates the pay grade for that position. The other pay grade categories are "W" for warrant officers and "E" for enlisted personnel. In the Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force, officers in pay grades O-1 to O-3 are called company grade officers, O-4 to O-6 are called field grade officers, and O-7 and higher are called general officers. Naval officers are grouped similarly but are called junior grade, mid-grade, and flag officers.

¹³Army Regulation 623-3.

¹⁴Army officers are evaluated against the six attributes and competencies of the Army Leadership Requirements Model: (1) character, (2) presence, (3) intellect, (4) leads, (5) develops, and (6) achieves.

the rater and senior rater.¹⁵ Additionally, when there is no uniformed Army-designated rating official for a rated officer, a uniformed Army advisor from the organization above the rating chain—known as a supplementary reviewer—reviews the officer’s rating.

Navy. The Navy’s performance evaluation system policy highlights the system’s dual aims of informing officers of their performance and informing promotion boards and the chain of command about officer performance.¹⁶ Under the system, the Navy’s performance evaluation report intends to guide performance and development, enhance accomplishment of the organization’s mission, and provide additional information to the chain of command.

In the Navy, officer performance evaluation reports are completed by an officer’s reporting senior, which is typically the officer’s commanding officer or officer-in-charge. The reporting senior evaluates officer performance across seven traits, based on a five-point scale.¹⁷ The five-point scale ranges from one to five, with a score of one indicating an officer’s performance is “below standards” and a score of five indicating it “greatly exceeds standards.” The officer’s average rating across all seven traits is used by the reporting senior to rank officers of the same grade against their peers.

Reporting seniors also assess promotion potential when completing performance evaluation reports. The promotion recommendation uses a five-point scale ranging from “significant problems” to “early promote,” with restrictions placed on how many “early promote” and “must promote” recommendations a reporting senior can give to help reduce ratings inflation Navy-wide.

Marine Corps. According to Marine Corps policy, the Marine Corps performance evaluation report is the primary means of evaluating performance and the Commandant’s primary tool for the selection of

¹⁵According to Army policy, an intermediate rater may only be used by specialty branches, such as the Chaplain Corps; when there is a level of technical supervision between the rater and senior rater; in dual supervisory situations; or when the rater’s immediate supervisor does not meet senior rater eligibility requirements. See Army Regulation 623-3.

¹⁶BUPERS Instruction 1610.10F Change Transmittal 1.

¹⁷The Navy’s seven performance evaluation traits for officers in grades W-2 through O-6 are (1) professional expertise, (2) command or organizational climate/equal opportunity, (3) military bearing/character, (4) teamwork, (5) mission accomplishment and initiative, (6) leadership, and (7) tactical performance for those who are warfare qualified.

personnel for promotion, resident schooling, and command and duty assignments, among other things.¹⁸

Under the system, the reporting senior is responsible for completing evaluation reports to capture an officer's performance for a set period and to judge potential, while the reviewing officer focuses on the officer's potential. The Marine Corps uses a seven-point scale to evaluate officer performance across 14 attributes.¹⁹ According to Marine Corps documentation, reporting seniors assign a rating based on the seven-point scale using letter grades A through H for each attribute. Each letter grade corresponds to a number with the letter "A" corresponding with a score of one and "G" corresponding with a score of seven. The letter "H" corresponds to a score of zero, which indicates that the attribute was "not observed" and therefore was not relevant to the rating period. Reporting seniors also provide narrative that corresponds to sections of attributes. The sum of all attribute grades is divided by the number of observed attributes to calculate the officer's evaluation average. Each reporting senior also maintains a score, known as the reporting senior average, which is calculated based on the total score of all evaluations a reporting senior has written on officers of a certain grade, divided by the total number of reports written for that grade.²⁰

Air Force. According to the Air Force performance evaluation system policy, the Air Force performance evaluation system is intended to communicate performance standards, expectations, and feedback to rated officers; establish a long-term cumulative record of performance and promotion potential; and provide sound information for talent

¹⁸Marine Corps Order 1610.7B.

¹⁹The 14 Marine Corps attributes are grouped by five categories: (1) Mission Accomplishment, which includes performance and proficiency; (2) Individual Character, which includes courage, effectiveness under stress, and initiative; (3) Leadership, which includes leading subordinates, developing subordinates, setting the example, ensuring the well-being of subordinates, and communication skills; (4) Intellect and Wisdom, which includes professional military education, decision making ability, and judgement; and (5) Fulfilment of Evaluation Responsibilities, which includes an attribute for evaluating subordinates.

²⁰A letter grade of "H" or "not observed" on an evaluation report is not used in the calculation of the average.

management decisions.²¹ In 2022, the Air Force modified its performance evaluation system to use narrative-style performance statements combined with a competency-based framework to rate officers based on four proficiency levels ranging from “exceptionally skilled” to “needs improvement.” Officer performance is measured based on 10 desired airman leadership qualities, which represent the performance characteristics the Air Force seeks to define, develop, incentivize, and measure in its airmen.²²

Within the system, the rater is responsible for rating an officer’s performance and potential based on performance throughout the rating period. A higher-level reviewer is responsible for performing an administrative review of all evaluations to, among other things, ensure all applicable blocks are completed and inappropriate comments or recommendations are not used.

Space Force. According to Space Force officials, the Space Force is currently implementing its own service-specific performance evaluation system after operating under the Department of the Air Force’s system since the service was established in 2019. In January 2024, the Space Force issued an instruction containing policy for its performance evaluation system to begin the process of standing up its own system.²³ Under this instruction, the Space Force maintained the use of legacy Air Force processes and forms to evaluate guardians.²⁴ Space Force officials stated that the service expects to reissue an updated version of that instruction with modifications to the system in late 2024. Officials further

²¹Air Force Instruction 36-2406. The Air Force reissued its policy on performance evaluations on August 6, 2024, during the final stages of our review. As a result, we were unable to analyze this new policy using the methodological approach we employed during the course of our review. Therefore, the report does not account for new changes to the policy that might otherwise affect the information presented here. However, an Air Force official told us that the revisions largely incorporate changes previously outlined in the January 2024 guidance memorandum, which was included in our analysis.

²²The 10 qualities are grouped into four major performance areas which, according to the Air Force, are indicative of potential for greater responsibility: (1) Executing the Mission, which includes job proficiency, adaptability, and initiative; (2) Leading People, which includes inclusion and teamwork, emotional intelligence, and communication; (3) Managing Resources, which includes stewardship and accountability; and (4) Improving the Unit, which includes decision making and innovation.

²³See Space Force Instruction 36-2401.

²⁴See Space Force Instruction 36-2401; Air Force Form 724, *Airman Comprehensive Assessment Worksheet* (July 1, 2014); Air Force Form 707, *Officer Performance Report* (July 31, 2015); Department of the Air Force Form 77, *Letter of Evaluation* (Aug. 4, 2023).

stated that Space Force-specific performance evaluation forms will accompany the reissued policy, as part of the planned update to the recently implemented system.

Similar to the Air Force, the Space Force's performance evaluation system policy is intended to communicate performance standards, expectations, and feedback; establish a reliable, long-term, cumulative record of performance and promotion potential based on performance; and provide sound information to assist in making talent management decisions.²⁵ Space Force officials stated that the future updates to the system will implement the Guardian Appraisal, which will facilitate the evaluation of guardians through two key lenses of performance: (1) duty performance, or the mission-related outcomes associated with work, and (2) Guardian Commitment, or the demonstration of values while completing work.²⁶ Space Force officials stated that as of January 2024, the service was still developing many aspects of the new system, including a performance feedback form to identify and document expectations, a mechanism for ongoing performance data collection, and a holistic training program that will launch with the implementation of the Guardian Appraisal.

Officer Promotions

Identifying and promoting talent is of particular importance to DOD because the services generally cannot hire individuals—such as commissioned officers—into its ranks at higher-level positions. Accordingly, the department must promote its leaders from within. Military officers are selected for promotion to the next pay grade through a formal process guided by legislation and DOD policy, which includes the use of promotion boards consisting of members who determine the eligible officers most qualified for promotion.

The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act, as amended, created a standardized system for managing the promotions for the officer corps of each of the military services.²⁷ Originally enacted in 1980, the act sought to establish a uniform framework of laws from among the existing

²⁵The Space Force currently evaluates officers against six performance traits: (1) Job Knowledge, (2) Leadership Skills, (3) Professional Qualities, (4) Organizational Skills, (5) Judgement and Decisions, and (6) Communication Skills.

²⁶The Guardian Commitment values are Character, Connection, Commitment, and Courage, according to Space Force officials.

²⁷Defense Officer Personnel Management Act, Pub. L. No. 96-513 (1980) (*codified as amended* in scattered sections of the United States Code).

patchwork of rules and regulations related to the appointment, promotion, separation, and retirement of commissioned officers of the military services. The specific provisions of the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act are codified in title 10 of the United States Code and, in combination, create a framework of laws for the management of active duty officers. This includes, for example, the creation of a closed personnel system that permits new officers to enter the system at low grades, with some exceptions, and promotions made from within to fill higher grades.

The military services convene statutory promotion selection boards—referred to in this report as promotion boards—made up of designated officers to consider and recommend eligible officers for promotion to the next grade. Prior to the board convening, board members receive instructions that communicate information about board proceedings, set selection standards for the best and most fully qualified officers, and define skill requirements to be considered by the board for each competitive category, along with additional considerations.²⁸ Once sworn in, board members are tasked with reviewing performance evaluations and other applicable items in an officer’s official record, which may include awards, education records, letters to the board, and adverse information.

Officer Performance Evaluation Systems Incorporate Key Practices to Varying Degrees

GAO Developed Key Practices for Performance Evaluation

We developed a list of 11 key practices for performance evaluation to assess the military services’ officer performance evaluation systems. To develop the practices, we conducted a literature review of scholarly articles, books, and other publications on performance evaluation systems and key practices used by public- and private-sector organizations. Two analysts independently analyzed the results of the





²⁸The military services use precepts—also referred to as memoranda of instruction—and, in some cases, convening orders to communicate information about a promotion board, such as convening dates and selection criteria. In this report, we refer to these documents collectively as promotion board instructions.

literature review to develop an initial list of practices.²⁹ We then incorporated, as appropriate, comments from internal stakeholders, academic experts, and DOD, military service, and other federal agency officials to develop the final set of practices. The 11 key practices for performance evaluation are shown in figure 1. These practices are grouped into three categories that relate to the design, implementation, and evaluation of a performance evaluation system.







²⁹See appendix IV for a list of the literature we included in our review.

Figure 1: GAO’s 11 Key Practices for Performance Evaluation Grouped into Three Categories


DESIGN

-  **Establish and communicate a clear purpose for the performance evaluation system**
Personnel should have a clear understanding of the intent of the system and why the organization is dedicating time and resources to the performance evaluation process.
-  **Allow for personnel to be directly involved in the performance evaluation process**
A successful performance evaluation system allows for individuals to provide input to the evaluation process, such as by writing self-appraisals or working collaboratively with management to identify performance goals. Active personnel participation helps increase understanding and ownership of the system and belief in its fairness.
-  **Create and update guidance on procedures for the performance evaluation system**
Instructions and protocols on the performance evaluation system’s processes, including personnel roles and responsibilities, should be documented, updated at appropriate intervals, and made accessible to ensure both raters and ratees know how the system functions.
-  **Provide ongoing training on procedures for the performance evaluation system**
Providing ongoing training on the performance evaluation system supports personnel’s understanding of and ability to operate the system in a manner consistent with organizational goals and objectives.

IMPLEMENTATION

-  **Align individual performance expectations with organizational goals**
An explicit alignment helps personnel see the connection between their daily activities and organizational goals.
-  **Communicate performance expectations and competencies to all personnel**
Clear, specific, and measurable expectations tied to specific competencies help drive important organizational goals and measure performance on factors that are directly linked to organizational success.
-  **Evaluate performance based on relevant competencies**
Competencies define the skills and supporting behaviors that personnel need to effectively contribute to organizational results.
-  **Make meaningful distinctions in performance**
Effective performance evaluation systems accurately assess personnel at different levels of performance based upon established expectations and competencies. They also provide the necessary objective information and documentation to reward top performers and deal with poor performers.
-  **Conduct performance evaluations in a timely fashion**
Management should consider the frequency of performance evaluations and conduct them at appropriate intervals. Additionally, performance evaluations should occur close in time to observed performance.
-  **Provide timely and actionable feedback on performance to personnel**
Effective performance management systems strive to provide candid and constructive feedback with specific, actionable suggestions on performance at key points in the performance evaluation cycle, including after the completion of a performance evaluation. Personnel need to know in a timely manner how they are doing, including both strengths and areas to improve.

EVALUATION

-  **Regularly evaluate the performance evaluation system and update as needed**
Routinely evaluating performance evaluation processes and tools and making necessary changes helps ensure the effectiveness, accuracy, and quality of the system. The results of the performance evaluation system should also be regularly evaluated for bias and accuracy.

Source: GAO (information and icons). | GAO-25-106618

The Military Services' Officer Performance Evaluation Systems Fully Incorporated Some, but Not All, Key Practices

Overall, of the 11 key practices for performance evaluation, all four of the military service systems fully incorporated the same five key practices and partially incorporated one key practice.³⁰ The service systems varied in their implementation of the remaining five practices, with some fully incorporating the practices, some partially incorporating the practices, and most not incorporating one practice. Figure 2 shows our assessment of the military services' performance evaluation systems against our 11 key practices, by category. Below the figure, we highlight key practices within each category that the service systems either partially incorporated or did not incorporate. Appendix V provides our complete analysis of the services' performance evaluation systems against all 11 key practices, including our assessment of all key practices the service systems fully incorporated.

³⁰As noted, we excluded the Space Force from this analysis because the service was in the process of implementing its own system, after operating under the Department of the Air Force's system since 2019. The Space Force issued guidance for its performance evaluation system in January 2024. See Space Force Instruction 36-2401. Space Force officials stated that the service expects to reissue the instruction with new performance evaluation forms in late 2024, as part of a planned update to the recently implemented system.

Figure 2: Overall Assessment of the Military Services' Officer Performance Evaluation Systems against GAO's 11 Key Practices for Performance Evaluation, Grouped by Category

Eleven Key Practices		Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force
Design	1 Establish and communicate a clear purpose for the performance evaluation system.	●	●	●	●
	2 Allow for personnel to be directly involved in the performance evaluation process.	●	●	●	●
	3 Create and update guidance on procedures for the performance evaluation system.	●	●	●	●
	4 Provide ongoing training on procedures for the performance evaluation system.	◐	◐	●	◐
Implementation	5 Align individual performance expectations with organizational goals.	●	○	○	○
	6 Communicate performance expectations and competencies to all personnel.	●	◐	◐	●
	7 Evaluate performance based on relevant competencies.	●	●	●	●
	8 Make meaningful distinctions in performance.	◐	●	●	●
	9 Conduct performance evaluations in a timely fashion.	●	●	●	●
	10 Provide timely and actionable feedback on performance to personnel.	◐	●	◐	●
Evaluation	11 Regularly evaluate the performance evaluation system and update as needed.	◐	◐	◐	◐

- Fully incorporated, found complete evidence that satisfied the key practice
- ◐ Partially incorporated, found evidence that satisfied some portion of the key practice
- Not incorporated, found no evidence that satisfied the key practice

Source: GAO analysis of military service documentation and information. | GAO-25-106618

Key Practices for the Design of Performance Evaluation Systems

Figure 3 shows our assessment of the military services' performance evaluation systems against the four key practices associated with the design of a performance evaluation system. These four practices relate to the establishment of a system's overall framework and precede steps to evaluate individual performance. All the military service systems fully incorporated three of the four practices.

Figure 3: Assessment of the Military Services’ Officer Performance Evaluation Systems against GAO’s Key Practices for Performance Evaluation, Design Category

Key Practices		Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force
Design	1 Establish and communicate a clear purpose for the performance evaluation system.	●	●	●	●
	2 Allow for personnel to be directly involved in the performance evaluation process.	●	●	●	●
	3 Create and update guidance on procedures for the performance evaluation system.	●	●	●	●
	4 Provide ongoing training on procedures for the performance evaluation system.	◐	◐	●	◐

- Fully incorporated, found complete evidence that satisfied the key practice
- ◐ Partially incorporated, found evidence that satisfied some portion of the key practice
- Not incorporated, found no evidence that satisfied the key practice

Source: GAO analysis of military service documentation and information. | GAO-25-106618

Provide ongoing training on procedures for the performance evaluation system. We found that the Marine Corps system fully incorporated this key practice. We also found that the Army, Navy, and Air Force systems partially incorporated the practice because their performance evaluation policies do not require ongoing training on their systems, and they have not established plans to provide such training to all officers.

- **Army.** The Army provides some performance evaluation-related training, such as through briefings provided during required courses of instruction. However, the Army’s policy for the performance evaluation system does not specify what training on the performance evaluation system is required, when training is required, and who is responsible for providing training. Additionally, the Army has not taken steps to ensure ongoing training on the system is provided to all officers, such as through the development of a training plan.

Army officials stated that some Army officers receive training on the performance evaluation system at certain career milestones, but not on an ongoing basis. For example, Army officials told us that all newly commissioned Army officers receive training on the performance evaluation system during the Army’s Basic Officer Leadership Course. They also said that officers selected for command positions receive a briefing on the performance evaluation system from Army Human Resources Command staff. Officials provided examples of briefing slides used during trainings that discussed various aspects of the Army’s system, including how to write effective narrative comments. Army officials also stated that training materials—including these

briefings—are made available on the Army Human Resources Command website.³¹

Army performance evaluation system policy requires that commanders and commandants at all levels ensure that rating officials are fully qualified to meet their responsibilities. However, the policy does not specify how commanders and commandants should ensure raters are qualified or that this should be achieved through training. Army officials also told us that training on the performance evaluation system is at the discretion of commanders.

Army officials further stated that training is the responsibility of Army Training and Doctrine Command. According to Army Training and Doctrine Command officials, training providers such as the Army Centers of Excellence may develop training on officer performance evaluations, which may become a model for other commands or centers to use. However, these officials stated that they do not have visibility over who receives such trainings or whether additional training courses are developed and used based off the initial model.

- **Navy.** The Navy provides some online performance evaluation-related training on specific aspects of its system, but its performance evaluation system policy does not specify what training is required, when such training is required, and who is responsible for providing such training. Additionally, the Navy has not taken steps to provide ongoing training to all officers to help ensure that all personnel understand and can operate the system in a manner consistent with organizational goals and objectives. For example, the Navy Personnel Command’s web page includes instructional videos for the online performance evaluation application, but these videos do not provide training on aspects of the system such as how to evaluate officer performance or how to write a self-assessment. Navy officials stated that individual officer communities may also conduct optional “brown bag” sessions to discuss aspects of the performance evaluation system, and that various leadership development courses and online tutorials offer lessons on the use of applicable software. However, according to Navy officials, the Navy does not have visibility into the extent of these other trainings provided on the performance evaluation system because it has not established training requirements in policy across the service.
- **Air Force.** The Air Force provides training on aspects of its performance evaluation system, such as a step-by-step guide for

³¹As of August 2024, the training portion of Army Human Resources Command Evaluation Systems Homepage included a note stating that training material was under review.

completing an electronic performance evaluation that is available to users within the service's online evaluation system. The Air Force's performance evaluation system policy states that commanders will ensure supervisors are properly trained and educated on how to write a performance evaluation.³² However, this policy does not specify what training on the performance evaluation system is required for officers and when such training is required. Moreover, the Air Force has not taken steps to provide such ongoing training to all officers. Air Force officials told us that Air Force Personnel Command conducts training for personnel service and support staff, who then train commanders and users, but officials could not say with certainty whether all officers receive training on the performance evaluation system and at what intervals. Additionally, Air Force officials did not provide us with materials related to ongoing training on the performance evaluation system.

In our one-on-one interviews, officers who also serve as raters under their service performance evaluation system described differing experiences in terms of the type and timing of training they received on their services' performance evaluation system. Some of the officers described receiving formal training once, typically earlier in their careers, such as at Officer Training School or command school. Other officers stated they received infrequent or occasional informal briefings on topics such as current trends in ratings, use of specific words in evaluations, and how to increase competitiveness in more recent years.³³ One officer we spoke with stated that training on writing performance evaluations is especially important because promotion board decisions are based on what is written in the evaluation report.

Our fourth key practice for performance evaluation states that organizations should provide ongoing training on procedures for the performance evaluation system. Providing ongoing training on the performance evaluation system supports personnel's understanding of and ability to operate the system in a manner consistent with organizational goals and objectives. Further, according to GAO's guide for assessing strategic training and development efforts in the federal government, planning allows agencies to establish priorities and determine how training and development investments can best be leveraged to improve performance, as well as to help ensure that such

³²Air Force Instruction 36-2406.

³³For more information about our nongeneralizable interviews with officers, see our second objective.

efforts are not initiated in an ad hoc, uncoordinated manner.³⁴ By developing a plan for the delivery of ongoing training to all officers on their respective performance evaluation systems, the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force may increase assurance that officers receive consistent and timely training on their systems and are able to conduct necessary steps in a manner that aligns with organizational goals and objectives.

Key Practices for the Implementation of Performance Evaluation Systems

Figure 4 shows our assessment of the military services' performance evaluation systems against the six key practices for the implementation of a performance evaluation system. These six practices relate to the steps and processes used to develop performance expectations, evaluate individual performance, and provide performance feedback. All the military service systems fully incorporated two of the six key practices in this category.

Figure 4: Assessment of the Military Services' Officer Performance Evaluation Systems against GAO's Key Practices for Performance Evaluation, Implementation Category

Key Practices		Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force
Implementation	5 Align individual performance expectations with organizational goals.	●	○	○	○
	6 Communicate performance expectations and competencies to all personnel.	●	◐	◐	●
	7 Evaluate performance based on relevant competencies.	●	●	●	●
	8 Make meaningful distinctions in performance.	◐	●	●	●
	9 Conduct performance evaluations in a timely fashion.	●	●	●	●
	10 Provide timely and actionable feedback on performance to personnel.	◐	●	◐	●

- Fully incorporated, found complete evidence that satisfied the key practice
- ◐ Partially incorporated, found evidence that satisfied some portion of the key practice
- Not incorporated, found no evidence that satisfied the key practice

Source: GAO analysis of military service documentation and information. | GAO-25-106618

Align individual performance expectations with organizational goals.

We found that the Army system fully incorporated this key practice. We also found that the Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force systems did not incorporate the practice because although officials told us the services

³⁴GAO's guide defines training as making available to employees planned and coordinated educational programs of instruction in professional, technical, or other fields that are or will be related to the employee's job responsibilities. See GAO, *Human Capital: A Guide for Assessing Strategic Training and Development Efforts in the Federal Government*, GAO-04-546G (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 2004).

have organizational goals, their performance evaluation system policies and guidance neither align performance expectations with such goals nor direct raters to do so. For the purpose of this review, we define an organization's goals as statements of end results expected within a specified period.³⁵

- **Navy.** The Navy's performance evaluation system policy describes how a supervisor should connect a sailor's performance to Navy core values and attributes during performance counseling sessions,³⁶ but it does not direct raters to explicitly align performance expectations with organizational goals.³⁷ Navy officials stated that a module in the Navy's next generation performance evaluation and management system will align individual performance expectations with organizational goals through expectations-based evaluations.³⁸ Officials believe this module will afford leaders throughout the Navy more influence over how officers are evaluated against critical Navy performance standards.
- **Marine Corps.** The Marine Corps' performance evaluation system policy states that reporting seniors must evaluate officers against missions, duties, tasks, and standards as communicated to the officer being evaluated. Specifically, according to that policy, the description of a marine's occupation or primary duties—or the billet description—should highlight significant responsibilities as they relate to the accomplishment of his or her unit's or organization's mission during

³⁵For the purpose of this review, we also define an organization's mission as its indelible purpose and reason for being, while an organization's values are the moral code of an organization—a set of rules embraced by all that reflect the ethics of the people in the organization to which all are held accountable.

³⁶The services use different terminology, including "performance counseling" and "counseling," to describe the process of a rater providing input to an officer on job responsibilities and performance. While our key practice uses the term "feedback" to describe these discussions, we use the service terms where appropriate.

³⁷BUPERS Instruction 1610.10F Change Transmittal 1.

³⁸According to the Navy, the Performance Evaluation Transformation is the Navy's next generation performance evaluation and management system that will incentivize, develop, and assess behaviors needed across the Navy. The Performance Evaluation Transformation includes a number of talent management upgrades aimed at improving the Navy's performance evaluation tools and processes, including, for example, more frequent and meaningful development conversations. According to Navy officials, as of July 2024, one module of the Navy's Performance Evaluation Transformation will align individual performance expectations with organizational goals through expectations-based evaluations. Officials further stated that this approach will allow leaders throughout the Navy more standardized influence over how sailors are evaluated against crucial Navy performance standards.

the reporting period. The performance evaluation system policy further requires that officers be evaluated against known Marine Corps values and soldierly virtues.

However, the policy does not require the alignment of individual performance expectations with organizational goals. A Marine Corps official stated that every unit is assigned a mission, and the unit's goals are tied to that mission. The official provided an example of a unit's organization and equipment report, which identifies the unit's assigned mission and how tasks should tie into that mission. This official further stated that if an officer understands his or her billet description and how that billet description relates to the mission of the unit, the officer's daily activities and expectations are effectively aligned with a unit's goals. However, the example of the unit organization and equipment report provided to us focused specifically on the unit's mission and, therefore, did not clearly reflect an alignment between mission and goals.

- **Air Force.** Air Force performance evaluation system documentation highlights the importance of the Air Force's Core Values, but its performance evaluation system policy does not require that raters align rated officers' individual expectations with organizational goals.³⁹ Air Force officials told us that individual performance expectations are aligned to four major performance areas, which are divided into 10 Airman Leadership Qualities, and are considered metrics for mission achievement. These major performance areas include (1) executing the mission, (2) leading people, (3) managing resources, and (4) improving the unit. The officials stated that the major performance areas are organizational goals that commanders and units are expected to achieve and be evaluated against.

However, documentation provided by Air Force officials aligned these major performance areas and the associated Airman Leadership Qualities with the Air Force's Core Values. The documentation also did not state that an explicit alignment of individual performance expectations with Air Force organizational goals should occur. As discussed, goals and values differ in that an organization's goals are end results expected to be achieved within a specified period, while its values are the moral code of the organization.

Our fifth key practice for performance evaluation states that organizations should align individual performance expectations with organizational goals. An explicit alignment helps personnel see the connection between

³⁹Air Force Instruction 36-2406.

their daily activities and organizational goals.⁴⁰ By revising policy or guidance to direct raters to explicitly align individual officer performance expectations with organizational goals, the Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force can better ensure that officers' daily activities and performance are cascading upwards to meet the goals of the organization.

Communicate performance expectations and competencies to all personnel. We found that the Army and Air Force systems fully incorporated this key practice. The Navy and Marine Corps systems partially incorporated the practice because they do not have assurance that clear, specific, and measurable performance expectations tied to specific competencies are being communicated to all personnel.

- **Navy.** As previously discussed, the Navy evaluates officers up to the rank of captain (O-6) against seven traits, or competencies, using a five-point scoring system. According to a Navy official, the Navy's performance evaluation system policy should guide officers' understanding of the system's procedures and processes. However, while the policy⁴¹ provides detailed descriptions for all traits used to evaluate flag officers, it identifies and provides detailed descriptions for only two of the seven traits used to evaluate all other commissioned officers.⁴²

Navy officials stated that due to concerns about the length of the policy, detailed descriptions were provided in the policy for the two traits that most often lead to adverse evaluations. Those two traits were (1) Command or Organizational Climate/Equal Opportunity and Character, and (2) Military Bearing and Character. One official further stated that raters and rated officers may refer to the performance evaluation report used during the performance evaluation cycle to identify the full list of traits on which officers are evaluated. However, the report provides only limited descriptions for the seven traits and describes what constitutes performance at three of the five rating

⁴⁰According to OPM, clear organizational goals can drive employee efforts throughout the organization, and communicating such goals to employees is essential to achieve desired outcomes. OPM further states that agencies may outline goals and outcomes they expect to achieve in strategic plans, and that the most effective way of communicating these goals is through direct communication between first-line supervisors and employees.

⁴¹BUPERS Instruction 1610.10F Change Transmittal 1.

⁴²Flag officers are senior naval officers in the four ranks of Rear Admiral (lower half), Rear Admiral, Vice Admiral, and Admiral. Flag officers have high-level interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational responsibilities and are assigned based on statutory limits and requirements.

levels; it does not provide full descriptions for the five traits not addressed by the policy. For example, the evaluation report identifies what performance levels should result in ratings of 1, 3, and 5, but does not provide descriptions for ratings of 2 or 4.

Further, the Navy does not have a mechanism for capturing or acknowledging that expectations and competencies were communicated by raters to rated officers. Navy policy states that raters will perform counseling at the midpoint of the performance evaluation cycle and at the signing of the report. While the Navy's performance evaluation report contains signature blocks to document that midpoint and final counseling occurred, it does not include a mechanism, such as a signature block, for the officer to acknowledge the communication of clear, specific, and measurable expectations tied to specific competencies.

- **Marine Corps.** The Marine Corps' performance evaluation system policy and its associated performance evaluation report clearly identify and define the competencies by which officers are evaluated and set the standards for specific performance ratings for each competency. The Marine Corps' policy also outlines a process for developing officer billet descriptions. This process serves to communicate performance expectations and competencies to officers, according to Marine Corps officials. The policy states that within the first 30 days of a reporting relationship, the rater and rated officer should meet to discuss and establish the rated officer's billet description and document it on the performance evaluation report. However, the Marine Corps' performance evaluation report does not include a mechanism—such as a signature block—for the officer to acknowledge this step.⁴³ A Marine Corps official confirmed that there is no such mechanism on the form and that there is nothing in current practice to ensure this process is occurring as intended. He stated that this was a gap in the Marine Corps' current approach and that the Marine Corps is exploring options to achieve greater assurance that the policy is being followed, such as by notifying both the rater and the rated officer when the 30-day window for the initial counseling session begins.

Our sixth key practice for performance evaluation states that organizations should communicate performance expectations and competencies to all personnel. Clear, specific, and measurable expectations tied to specific competencies help drive important organizational goals and measure performance on factors that are directly linked to organizational success. Additionally, *Standards for Internal*

⁴³Marine Corps Order 1610.7B.

Control in the Federal Government states that management should design control activities—such as the policies, procedures, techniques, and mechanisms that enforce management’s directives—to achieve an entity’s objectives and address related risks.⁴⁴ By revising its performance evaluation system policy to identify and define all traits by which officers are evaluated, the Navy will be positioned to better communicate expectations and competencies to all personnel. Separately, by developing a mechanism, such as a signature block on the evaluation report, to acknowledge the completion of performance expectation and competency discussions, the Navy and the Marine Corps will have greater assurance that this step is being carried out, as required.

Make meaningful distinctions in performance. We found that the Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force performance evaluation systems fully incorporated this key practice. We found that the Army’s system partially incorporated this practice because it employs a forced distribution of ratings, which limits the number of top-level ratings—known as the “top block”—a rater may assign to officers of any grade. This forced distribution may not result in accurate, meaningful distinctions of officer performance.

As previously discussed, Army raters evaluate officer performance by selecting a check box on the performance evaluation report that aligns with a four-tier rating scale. According to Army policy, under the Army’s forced distribution, a rater’s use of the top-level rating cannot exceed 50 percent of officers within each grade of officers evaluated by that rater.⁴⁵ Army officials stated that this limit on the top-level rating enforces rater accountability while controlling ratings inflation.

According to Army documentation, the rater’s overall distribution of ratings—known as the rater’s profile—is maintained over the rater’s entire career. Officials stated that when evaluating an officer’s performance, a

⁴⁴[GAO-14-704G](#).

⁴⁵Officials stated that the Army uses a partial distribution system rather than a full distribution system since the Army does not have a distribution for each of the overall rating categories. Officials told us that to ensure maximum rating flexibility when rating populations change, raters need to maintain a “cushion” in the number of top-level ratings given. Raters may consider limiting the use of the “Excels” rating to roughly one-third of all ratings for officers of a given rank, but this is not an Army requirement. To remove some concerns associated with immature profiles, or small populations, officials told us that raters are provided a “credit” of three “Excels” selections when first rating officers of a new grade. According to Army officials, this credit allows the rater to immediately rate two officers as “Excels.”

rater must consider the performance of all officers of the same grade that the rater previously evaluated, as well as all future officers the rater may evaluate. This may result in a rater assigning a high-performing officer a more average rating to help ensure they reserve space within their profile to assign top-level ratings to future officers. While the use of a forced distribution system is not prohibited for active duty service members, an OPM memorandum states that the forced distribution of civilian employees among levels of performance is prohibited, because employees are required to be assessed against documented standards of performance versus an individual's performance relative to others to ensure accurate individual ratings based on objective criteria.⁴⁶

During our officer interviews, two of the six Army officers stated they felt the Army's forced distribution poses challenges for raters to accurately evaluate officer performance. One officer told us that the timing of an officer's evaluation could factor into their rater's assessment of performance because the rater may be constrained by the forced distribution. For example, according to the officer, raters may choose to withhold higher ratings for officers close to retirement in order to maximize their ability to use higher ratings to advance the careers of those who will remain in the Army. Another officer stated that rating can be difficult in organizations with a concentration of top performers or individuals with highly specialized training because raters are constrained by the same cap as all other units.

Our eighth key practice for performance evaluation states that organizations should make meaningful distinctions in performance. Effective performance evaluation systems accurately assess personnel at different levels of performance based upon established expectations and competencies. They also provide the necessary objective information and documentation to reward top performers and deal with poor performers. Additionally, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* states that management should identify, analyze, and respond to risks

⁴⁶Director, OPM Memorandum, *Applying Rigor in the Performance Management Process and Leveraging Awards Programs for a High-Performing Workforce* (July 12, 2019). Army officials told us they do not believe the OPM restriction is relevant to the military because military officers compete for promotion in each rank, while civilians apply for promotion through hiring practices established by OPM. However, such differences in the promotion process do not affect the intent of the restrictions on performance ratings, which is consistent with our key practice that organizations should make meaningful distinctions in performance based on objective criteria.

related to achieving the defined objectives.⁴⁷ By assessing the design, implementation, and outcomes associated with its forced distribution model, the Army will have better insight into whether its performance evaluation system is resulting in accurate, meaningful distinctions of officer performance. Moreover, such an assessment would allow the Army to consider alternatives as necessary based on the findings of the assessment.

Provide timely and actionable feedback on performance to personnel. We found that the Navy and Air Force performance evaluation systems fully incorporated this key practice. We also found that the Army and Marine Corps systems partially incorporated the practice because their policies do not require that raters provide performance feedback at all key points in the process. Further, the Army policy does not require that officers of all grades receive performance feedback.

- **Army.** The Army has established some limited time frames for the provision of performance feedback to some officer grades, but it has not required that all officer grades receive performance feedback or that feedback be provided following a performance evaluation. Moreover, it does not have a mechanism to help ensure that feedback occurs after a performance evaluation.

Army policy states that initial performance counseling should be provided within the first 30 days of the rating period, and quarterly thereafter, for officers in grades O-1 through O-3. However, according to this policy, initial and ongoing counseling for all other officer grades is provided on an as-needed basis. Army officials stated that once an officer reaches the grade of O-4 or higher, they should understand the Army's and their supervisor's expectations. These officials further stated that for grades O-4 and above, counseling should be an informal, ongoing process since formal or documented counseling has the potential to carry a negative connotation. The Army's performance evaluation system policy does not require raters to conduct counseling or other performance feedback sessions with officers of all grades after a performance evaluation or to identify time frames for conducting such sessions.

Additionally, the Army does not have a mechanism on its officer performance evaluation forms to ensure that feedback is delivered

⁴⁷[GAO-14-704G](#).

after the officer's performance evaluation.⁴⁸ Army policy requires the use of the Officer Evaluation Report Support Form, which includes a section for the rated officer, rater, and senior rater to verify that face-to-face counseling occurred periodically during the evaluation cycle.⁴⁹ Separately, the Army's officer performance evaluation report includes a section for the rater to indicate that the Officer Evaluation Report Support Form was received and used when drafting the officer's rating. However, the Officer Evaluation Report Support Form, which documents the dates counseling occurred, is completed prior to the preparation of the officer's evaluation report by the rating chain and, therefore, cannot capture whether feedback was provided with the performance evaluation report.

According to Army officials, a rated officer authenticates—or signs—an evaluation report after all rating officials in the rating chain have conducted and authenticated their assessment of the rated officer's performance. These officials further stated that according to Army policy, the final evaluation report must be submitted for processing to an officer's permanent record within 90 days of the date the evaluation report was completed. According to the officials, this time frame provides rating officials the opportunity to present, discuss, and authenticate an evaluation report with a rated officer. The officials further stated that the submission of the final evaluation report represents the acknowledgment that all required steps during the evaluation period were completed.⁵⁰ However, as discussed, Army policy does not require raters to provide performance feedback with the performance evaluation report and there is no mechanism, such as a signature block on the evaluation report, to capture that any feedback occurred.

⁴⁸The Army uses the DA Form 67-10 series of three performance evaluation reports to evaluate its officer ranks based on the grade of the officer. For example, DA Form 67-10-1 is used to evaluate the performance of officers in grades O1-O3 and Warrant Officer 1 through Chief Warrant Officer 2.

⁴⁹According to Army performance evaluation system guidance, the Officer Evaluation Report Support Form—DA Form 67-10-1A—is mandatory for officers in ranks of Warrant Officer 1 (WO-1) through Colonel (O-6), but may be used for officers of all ranks to facilitate performance and developmental counseling. See Department of the Army Pamphlet 623-3, *Evaluation Reporting System* (Sept. 27, 2019).

⁵⁰Specifically, the Army's performance evaluation report includes a place for raters to affirm whether the Officer Evaluation Report Support Form was used. According to Army officials, authentication by the rating official validates all information entered on the support form.

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- **Marine Corps.** The Marine Corps partially incorporated this practice because although its policies and guidance provide for the provision of some feedback, it does not have clear requirements for performance feedback following a performance evaluation or a mechanism to ensure that feedback is delivered at all key points in the performance evaluation cycle.

Specifically, the process for providing performance feedback in the Marine Corps is defined within three policy and guidance documents—its counseling guidance, performance evaluation system policy, and leadership development policy.⁵¹ The counseling guidance—which officials told us governs the counseling program for the Marine Corps independent of the performance evaluation system policy—states that officers will receive an initial counseling session within 30 days of establishing a rater-ratee relationship and follow-on sessions at intervals of no more than 6 months.⁵² However, neither this counseling guidance nor the two other policy documents establish clear requirements for the provision of feedback with specific, actionable suggestions on performance to officers after the completion of a performance evaluation. The Marine Corps performance evaluation system policy specifically states that counseling⁵³ is separate and complementary to performance evaluation.⁵⁴

Additionally, while the Marine Corps' counseling guidance sets the time frames for initial and follow-on counseling, it does not require documentation of those counseling sessions and leaves specific procedures up to the individual unit commanders. This guidance provides worksheet templates and recommended elements for the documentation of counseling. But neither the guidance nor associated documentation include a mechanism—such as a signature block—for the officer being evaluated to acknowledge the completion of

⁵¹Marine Corps Order 1610.7B; Marine Corps Order 1500.61, *Marine Leader Development* (July 28, 2017); Department of the Navy, NAVMC 2795, *USMC User's Guide to Counseling* (July 21, 1986).

⁵²NAVMC 2795.

⁵³Marine Corps policy for leadership development defines counseling as the mechanism used to provide feedback on performance. See Marine Corps Order 1500.61.

⁵⁴Marine Corps Order 1610.7B. This policy further states that the performance evaluation system should highlight past performance, that counseling should shape future performance, and that the performance evaluation report is not a counseling tool.

counseling during the performance evaluation cycle or following the completion of a performance evaluation report.

Sixteen of the 31 officers we interviewed told us they received feedback accompanying their most recent performance evaluation report, while the remaining fifteen told us they did not receive such feedback—including three of the six Army officers and two of the six Marine Corps officers.⁵⁵ For example, one Marine Corps officer told us that the Marine Corps does not have a system in place to force the rater to provide feedback to an officer on the performance evaluation report. The officer further told us that feedback is considered a good practice but not a requirement, and that sometimes officers do not receive feedback at all. Similarly, another Marine Corps officer stated that although officers are supposed to receive quarterly counseling, performance feedback following a performance evaluation is often not provided because there is no formal requirement to do so. We present additional officer perspectives on the types and frequency of feedback received later in this report.

Our tenth key practice for performance evaluation states that organizations should provide timely and actionable feedback on performance to personnel. Effective performance management systems strive to provide candid and constructive feedback with specific, actionable suggestions on performance at key points in the performance evaluation cycle, including after the completion of a performance evaluation. Personnel need to know in a timely manner how they are doing, including both strengths and areas to improve. Additionally, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* states that management should design control activities—such as the policies, procedures, techniques, and mechanisms that enforce management’s directives—to achieve objectives and address related risks.⁵⁶

By establishing clear requirements in policy for the delivery of performance feedback at all key points of the performance evaluation process—including after the completion of a performance evaluation report—and creating a mechanism, such as a signature block, to ensure it occurs, the Army can better ensure that officers receive timely and actionable information on their performance throughout the process. Similarly, by (1) establishing clear requirements in policy for the provision of timely and actionable performance feedback following the completion

⁵⁵Similarly, two Navy officers, four Air Force officers, and four Space Force officers told us they did not receive feedback with their most recent performance evaluation reports.

⁵⁶[GAO-14-704G](#).

of a performance evaluation report, and (2) developing a mechanism, such as a signature block, to ensure feedback at all key points of the process occurs, the Marine Corps can better ensure that feedback is provided to all officers.

Key Practices for the Evaluation of Performance Evaluation Systems

Figure 5 shows our assessment of the military services' performance evaluation systems against our key practice for evaluating system processes and tools to ensure effectiveness, accuracy, and quality.

Figure 5: Assessment of the Military Services' Officer Performance Evaluation Systems against GAO's Key Practices for Performance Evaluation, Evaluation Category

Key Practice		Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force
Evaluation	11 Regularly evaluate the performance evaluation system and update as needed.	○	○	○	○

- Fully incorporated, found complete evidence that satisfied the key practice
- ◐ Partially incorporated, found evidence that satisfied some portion of the key practice
- Not incorporated, found no evidence that satisfied the key practice

Source: GAO analysis of military service documentation and information. | GAO-25-106618

Regularly evaluate the performance evaluation system and update as needed. We found that all four of the military services partially incorporated this practice because although the services update their performance evaluation policies and have studied some aspects of their systems, they have not regularly evaluated their systems, including system processes and tools, and do not have plans for conducting such evaluations in the future.

- **Army.** According to Army officials, the Army's most recent evaluation of its performance evaluation system—a directed review—culminated in 2014.⁵⁷ Since then, officials told us, the Army's efforts to evaluate its system have included the processing and final compliance reviews of ratings, and the consideration of ad hoc updates to the system's policies, processes, and tools. For example, Army officials stated that changes in law, Army doctrine, and DOD policy are considered when

⁵⁷Officials stated that directed reviews are used when significant problems or issues arise or are suspected in the system, and that it takes a minimum of 3 to 5 years to see the impact of a substantial change to a performance evaluation system. Army officials further stated that the Army implemented its partial distribution system in 1997 and later refined the system following the 2014 directed review to better promote accountability among rating officials and align assessment capabilities with the grade of the rated officer.

proposed to ensure that the performance evaluation system remains current with such changes.

According to Army policy, the senior rater is responsible for conducting a final review of the ratings to check for objectivity and fairness of officer ratings and completeness of performance evaluation reports.⁵⁸ Army officials also stated that the Army Human Resources Command's Evaluations Branch receives every Army evaluation report for processing and final review for compliance with established policy and checks for violation or error, among other things. Army officials stated that these final review responsibilities help ensure constant oversight and monitoring capabilities for the health of the Army's performance evaluation system. These officials further stated that feedback is collected following selection board deliberations to assess system effectiveness. However, while Army officials described examples of efforts to us, they were unable to provide us with documentation to support how or when such reviews and evaluations occur or a plan for conducting such reviews in the future.

- **Navy.** The Navy has made incremental changes to its performance evaluation system. For example, in 2022, the Navy began implementing an electronic system for filing performance evaluation reports. Additionally, two recent studies conducted by the Naval Postgraduate School reviewed aspects of the system. Specifically, one of the studies identified perceptions of the Navy's system and compared it to the other services' systems, while the other validated future performance traits the Navy has developed as part a new performance evaluation system prototype.⁵⁹ Navy policy also states that commands should establish quality review processes to check performance evaluations for completeness.⁶⁰ However, the Navy has not regularly evaluated the system's processes and tools to help ensure the effectiveness, accuracy, and quality of the system. Further, it does not have a process for conducting reviews of ratings or ratings trends to ensure fairness or accuracy of individual ratings.

⁵⁸Army Regulation 623-3.

⁵⁹E.G. Helzer and M. Bacolod, *Performance Evaluation Trait Validation*, Naval Postgraduate School, NPS-DDM-22-005 (Monterrey, Calif.: Naval Postgraduate School, Oct. 2022); and S. Y. Ahn and L. Hartmann, *Performance Evaluation Needs Assessment*, Naval Postgraduate School, NPS-DDM-22-004 (Monterrey, Calif.: Naval Postgraduate School, Oct. 2022).

⁶⁰BUPERS Instruction 1610.10F Change Transmittal 1.

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- **Marine Corps.** According to Marine Corps officials, the last major evaluation or study of its performance evaluation system was conducted in 1996, just prior to the service adopting its current system. However, the Marine Corps has since made updates to its system through revisions and changes to the performance evaluation system policy, with the most recent reissuance occurring in June 2023. The Marine Corps also has processes for inspecting performance evaluation reports and reviewing rating trends, which according to officials, include reviews at the headquarters level for accuracy and completeness. However, these efforts do not include regular evaluation of the system's processes and tools to help ensure its effectiveness, accuracy, and quality.⁶¹
 - **Air Force.** According to Air Force officials, the Air Force makes incremental changes—such as policy updates—to its performance evaluation system as needed and has a process for ensuring completeness of performance evaluation reports. However, it has not regularly evaluated the system's processes and tools to help ensure the effectiveness, accuracy, and quality of the system, and it does not review ratings or related trends to ensure fairness or accuracy of individual ratings.

The Air Force's performance evaluation system policy requires that the Directorate of Military Force Management Policy establish an annual evaluation systems program review to determine if improvements or changes are needed. An Air Force official told us that such reviews have not been required due to the frequency of updates made to the performance evaluation system policy, with some as recent as 2023 and 2024. However, the policy-specific updates officials described were not based on evaluations of the system's processes or tools. For example, officials stated that the most recent policy update revised the Department of the Air Force policy to be applicable only to the Air Force following the issuance of the Space Force's policy. Additionally, the Air Force's performance evaluation system policy states that major commands may conduct an optional quality review of ratings and return any for correction, as

⁶¹According to a Marine Corps official, the Deputy Commandant of the Marine Corps for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, who oversees the performance evaluation system, recently proposed an operational planning team study of aspects of the performance evaluation system. However, according to the official, as of May 2024, no further information was available about that study and the effort did not have a proposed start date.

necessary.⁶² However, the policy does not prescribe the scope of these reviews and their optional nature does not ensure that the results of the performance evaluation system are reviewed on a regular or routine basis.

Air Force officials also told us that the Air Force has contracted with the RAND Corporation to develop an evaluation plan to study the impact of changes made to the Air Force's performance evaluation system, which will include surveying airmen at all ranks to gather feedback on their experiences with the performance evaluation system. However, officials did not state how these perspectives would inform an evaluation of the performance evaluation system. Moreover, while the Air Force has this effort underway, it does not have a plan to evaluate its performance evaluation system moving forward.

Our eleventh key practice for performance evaluation states that organizations should regularly evaluate their performance evaluation systems and update them as needed. Routinely evaluating performance evaluation processes and tools and making necessary changes helps ensure the effectiveness, accuracy, and quality of the system. Further, the results of the performance evaluation system should also be regularly evaluated for bias and accuracy. By developing plans to regularly evaluate their officer performance evaluation systems, including system tools and processes, the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force will be better positioned to ensure that their performance evaluation systems are achieving intended results in an effective and accurate manner. Moreover, by developing a process for conducting reviews of the results of their performance evaluation systems, for example, through reviews of ratings or ratings trends, the Navy and Air Force will have better assurance that performance evaluation ratings are accurate and free from bias.

⁶²An Air Force Major Command is a major subdivision of the Air Force that is assigned a major part of the Air Force mission and is directly subordinate to Headquarters Air Force.

Promotion Boards Use Performance Evaluation Reports to Inform Determinations, but Officer Perspectives Differ on Whether Evaluations Support Development

Promotion board members and other officers we interviewed provided differing perspectives on the value of information captured in officer performance evaluation reports. Promotion board members felt the evaluation reports provided sufficient information to inform their decisions about which officers to recommend for promotions. However, other officers we spoke with shared mixed perspectives on the value of their performance evaluations and the extent to which they support officer development. The information captured during our interviews with promotion board members and other military officers is not generalizable to the broader officer or total military populations, but it provides insights into potential areas that may warrant further consideration by the services as they assess their individual performance evaluation systems. As previously discussed, the military services have not regularly evaluated their performance evaluation systems' tools and processes.

Performance Evaluation Reports Directly Inform Officer Promotion Determinations

Military officer performance evaluation reports provide key information for promotion boards making determinations about which officers to select for promotion. As discussed, the military services convene promotion boards to consider and recommend eligible officers for promotion to the next grade.⁶³ Board members receive instructions about board proceedings prior to the board convening and review performance evaluation reports and other applicable items in an officer's official record once the board convenes. These items include awards, education records, letters to the board, and adverse information.

According to service policies, the military services' officer performance evaluation reports provide the primary source of information to support selection of the best qualified officers for promotion, career designation, retention, schooling, and command and duty assignments. As discussed, each service's evaluation report comprises a unique combination of competencies, rating scales, and narratives to provide a documented assessment of an officer's performance during the performance period.

To better understand promotion board members' use of performance evaluation information during board deliberations, we conducted 19 nongeneralizable interviews with officers who served on at least one

⁶³The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act, as amended, created a standardized system for managing the promotions for the officer corps of each of the military services. See Defense Officer Personnel Management Act, Pub. L. No. 96-513 (1980) (*codified as amended* in scattered sections of the United States Code).

statutory promotion board since January 1, 2020.⁶⁴ Overall, promotion board members we interviewed held positive views of the quantity of information they received during board proceedings and of the time they were afforded to consider the information.

- **Quantity of information.** All 19 members we interviewed stated they felt they received enough information—across all sources of information they received—during the most recent promotion board they served on to make an informed decision about whether to recommend specific officers for promotion. Two board members told us that the addition of more information on the officers could hinder the board’s progress.
- **Time to consider information.** Seventeen of the 19 board members felt they had enough time to consider the information provided on each officer. Two board members told us that additional time was allowed, as needed, to review all the necessary information on the officers. Another board member noted that being new to the board process and a slower reader resulted in concern about keeping up with the more experienced board members who were more familiar with the process.

When asked about the specific types of information the board members reviewed, 18 of the 19 promotion board members told us they reviewed officer performance evaluation reports when considering an officer for promotion. One board member responded that he did not review the evaluation report for every officer being considered because, as part of the board’s procedures, summary information was presented by other board members who were responsible for reviewing and presenting specific officer files. Overall, board members generally held positive views of the usefulness and level of detail of officer performance evaluation reports.

- **Usefulness of reports.** Seventeen of the 18 board members who told us they reviewed officer performance evaluation reports found the information contained in the reports to be useful or very useful when deciding whether to recommend an officer for promotion. One member stated that evaluation reports were very useful because almost all reports clearly conveyed whether an officer should be promoted, and that it would be rare for a board to see a generic report that did not clearly indicate future potential. Another board member

⁶⁴See appendix I for the complete questionnaire used for our promotion board member interviews and appendix III for a complete description of our interview methodology.

told us the evaluation reports are useful, but not very useful, because the reports provide the best possible image of the officer since the goal is to get the officer promoted. One board member told us that the information contained in the evaluation reports is somewhat useful but did not explain why certain types of information were only somewhat useful.

- **Detail of reports.** Sixteen of the 18 board members who told us they reviewed officer performance evaluations felt their service's evaluation reports provided enough detail to inform their decisions about whether to recommend an officer for promotion. For example, several board members identified specific sections on the evaluation report that highlight an officer's performance in a specific role. Conversely, one officer told us that the performance evaluation reports do not provide enough detail due to a limit on the narrative that must capture an entire year's worth of performance. One other board member did not answer the question.

Promotion board members also described specific words or phrases that may be used in performance evaluation reports to send a signal about officer performance to promotion boards. Specifically, 16 of the 19 promotion board members we interviewed were aware of certain words or phrases used by raters in performance evaluation reports to communicate with the promotion boards. For example, according to board members, statements such as "promote immediately," "future general," and "enthusiastically recommend" are often used to convey a positive message to the board about an officer's potential. The board members also stated that vague language, or the omission of certain words or phrases—such as the aforementioned examples—serves as a signal to the board that the rater would not endorse the officer for promotion. Board members stated that they did not receive training on how to interpret these words or phrases; rather, they had a general understanding of how to interpret them based on their time operating under their services' performance evaluation system.

While promotion board members' responses about the utility of performance evaluations were generally positive, some members made suggestions related to the information provided to the boards. For example, several members stated they would like to see 360-degree feedback incorporated into the evaluations or added to officers' files to better capture peer or subordinate views of officers' performance, and to provide the boards with further insight into officers' leadership potential or concerns about toxic behavior. Additionally, members who served on Space Force promotion boards felt more time should be spent reviewing

information about other military services' performance evaluation systems and reports to better understand how those systems operate, since the newest service is composed of transfers from other services. Finally, some board members made suggestions about ways the services could better address the potential for bias based on gender or race. For example, one board member stated that names should be replaced with a number on performance reports to further eliminate identifiers of gender and race.

See appendix VI for summary data of responses to selected questions from promotion board members who volunteered to be interviewed about their experiences serving on a statutory promotion selection board.

Officers Shared Varying Perspectives on How Evaluations Support Their Development

Officers we interviewed about their own performance evaluation experience shared a range of perspectives on whether performance evaluation reports and related feedback provide useful information that supports their development. We conducted nongeneralizable interviews with 31 officers across all five military services to capture these perspectives.⁶⁵

Performance evaluation reports. Three officers we interviewed stated that their service's performance evaluations provide a clear and relevant tool for assessing officer performance and supporting officer development. For example, one officer stated that the system is transparent and that he would not change any aspects of the system. Another officer stated that the criteria outlined in the evaluation are well developed and associated expectations were clearly described by the rater. Additionally, one officer stated that one of his performance evaluation reports prompted a discussion about overall performance and ways to continue progressing professionally.

By contrast, several officers stated that performance evaluations do not provide actionable information that supports development. Officers that held these views cited three main reasons for why performance evaluations do not provide actionable information.

- **Content policies and expectations.** Six of the officers noted that service policies and expectations about the content of performance evaluation comments limit the use of actionable information that could

⁶⁵See appendix II for the complete questionnaire used for our officer interviews and appendix III for a complete description of our interview methodology.

support officer development.⁶⁶ For example, one officer stated that performance evaluations provide only positive accounts of an officer's performance, with little information on necessary improvements to performance. Another officer told us that it can be difficult to write clearly about an officer's performance due to perceived restrictions on what a rater can and cannot say.

- **Misused or overused common narrative.** Three officers we interviewed stated that because some raters misuse or overuse common narrative, the evaluations may not provide a clear picture of a rated officer's performance or areas in need of growth or emphasis. For example, one officer stated that some raters inaccurately characterize performance using commonly used positive narrative because they are reluctant to have difficult conversations with underperforming officers.
- **Audience of reports.** Six officers suggested that the content and presentation of information in performance reports do not support development because promotion boards are the target audience of evaluations. For example, one officer stated that raters include or do not include certain phrases or statements—such as enumeration about where the officer ranks or when they should be promoted in relation to peers—to send a message to the board. Another officer stated that since board members likely do not know the officers personally, the evaluation reports will convey overall performance and career potential but will not necessarily reflect areas of growth.

Performance feedback. Twenty nine of the 31 officers we interviewed reported receiving some form of feedback on their performance at some point during their most recent evaluation cycles. According to the officers, this feedback was typically provided in the form of ongoing or scheduled feedback sessions or in response to a specific action. As we have previously discussed, the provision of timely and actionable feedback on performance is GAO's tenth key practice for performance evaluation.

As previously noted, 16 of the 31 officers we interviewed told us they received feedback accompanying their most recent performance

⁶⁶According to service policies, performance evaluations may include verified or substantiated derogatory information about an officer's performance, but inclusion of this information may result in an adverse or referred report. For example, the Marine Corps performance evaluation system policy states that the rater shall avoid negative phrases and their implications unless documenting performance or conduct-based adversity. According to the policy, examples of negative words, phrases, or qualifying adverbs include "but, however, nevertheless..."; "lacks the..."; and "usually, sometimes, normally, generally."

evaluation report. Of those, nine officers felt that the feedback they received was either valuable or very valuable to their development as an officer. For example, one officer told us that he received critical feedback during an end-of-evaluation cycle feedback session, which allowed him to improve his performance without detrimental career impacts. Of the remaining seven officers, five stated that the feedback they received with their most recent performance evaluation was somewhat or slightly valuable, while two stated that the feedback received with their most recent performance evaluation was not valuable at all to their development.

When asked to consider all types of feedback—not only the feedback provided with their most recent performance evaluation—received since January 1, 2022, 10 of the 31 officers told us that feedback provided during ongoing or scheduled sessions was the most valuable form of feedback to their professional development. Nine of the 31 officers stated that feedback in response to a specific action was the most valuable, and three officers said the feedback they received with a performance evaluation was the most valuable type of feedback to their professional development.⁶⁷ Of the remaining nine officers, eight cited other instances during which they received feedback that they found to be the most valuable to their professional development. One officer was unsure which type of feedback was the most valuable.

Other officers we interviewed described not receiving feedback at all or having feedback sessions that were largely perfunctory, particularly when their performance evaluation was positive. For example, one officer stated that actionable feedback was never provided with prior performance evaluation reports and that rater comments accompanying the evaluation reports were limited to statements such as “good job” and a request for signature. The officer further stated that developmental feedback should be provided at midpoint so that performance can be corrected between midpoint and receiving the performance evaluation report. Similarly, several other officers noted that when the evaluation is good, the feedback provided is to maintain the status quo in terms of performance without mention of ways to develop further as an officer. See appendix VII for summary data of responses to selected questions from

⁶⁷For the purposes of this report, “feedback in response to a specific action” means feedback that is more conversational in nature tied closely in time to a specific effort or activity.

our interviews with officers about their services' performance evaluation systems.

Conclusions

Effective performance evaluation and promotion selection for officers is critical for the future of the department's leadership. The military services have developed and implemented performance evaluation systems that fully or partially incorporate most of our key practices for performance evaluation systems. For example, all four service systems have established and communicated a clear purpose for their systems and created and updated guidance on procedures accordingly. However, gaps exist in some services' efforts to design their systems consistent with our key practices. For example, although the military services provide some training to officers on their performance evaluation systems, the Army, Navy, and Air Force have not specified certain training requirements or developed a plan to ensure officers are provided training on an ongoing basis. By developing plans for the delivery of training, the Army, Navy, and Air Force can better ensure that officers receive consistent and timely training that supports their understanding of and ability to operate the performance evaluation system in a manner consistent with organizational goals and objectives.

Similarly, although the services have taken steps to incorporate key practices related to the implementation of performance evaluation systems, gaps also exist in the alignment of performance expectations with organizational goals and the communication of expectations and competencies. Specifically, by revising their performance evaluation system policies and guidance documents to require raters to explicitly align officer expectations with organizational goals, the Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force can better ensure that officers' daily activities are connected to the organization's goals. In addition, by identifying and defining all seven performance traits on which officers are evaluated, the Navy can better ensure that officers have a clear understanding of their performance expectations and competencies. Further, by developing a mechanism, such as a signature block, for raters and officers to acknowledge that such communications of performance expectations and competencies occur, the Navy and Marine Corps can provide better assurance that all performance expectations and competencies are communicated to officers.

Implementation gaps also extend to making performance distinctions and providing performance feedback. By taking steps to assess the design, implementation, and outcomes associated with its forced distribution model, the Army will be better positioned to identify whether its

performance evaluation system is accurately assessing personnel at different levels of performance based upon established expectations and competencies. Further, by revising their performance evaluation system policies to include requirements for feedback to officers of all grades at all key points, the Army and Marine Corps can better ensure that all officers receive feedback at all key points in the process, including following their performance evaluation.

Finally, while the military services have variously updated performance evaluation system policies and studied aspects of their evaluation systems, opportunities to strengthen these efforts exist. By developing plans to regularly evaluate their officer performance evaluation systems, the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force will achieve better insight into whether their systems are operating effectively and in a manner that achieves intended results. Additionally, by developing processes to review the results of their officer ratings, the Navy and Air Force will have better assurance that performance evaluation ratings are accurate and free from bias.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making a total of 20 recommendations, including five to the Army, 11 to the Navy, and four to the Air Force.

The Secretary of the Army should develop a plan for the delivery of training on the Army's performance evaluation system to all officers on an ongoing basis. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Chief of Naval Operations develops a plan for the delivery of training on the Navy's performance evaluation system to all officers on an ongoing basis. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of the Air Force should develop a plan for the delivery of training on the Air Force's performance evaluation system to all officers on an ongoing basis. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Chief of Naval Operations revises the Navy's performance evaluation system policy to ensure that raters explicitly align officer expectations with organizational goals. (Recommendation 4)

The Secretary of the Air Force should revise the Air Force's performance evaluation system policy or guidance to ensure that raters explicitly align officer expectations with organizational goals. (Recommendation 5)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure the Commandant of the Marine Corps revises the Marine Corps' performance evaluation system policy to ensure that raters explicitly align officer expectations with organizational goals. (Recommendation 6)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Chief of Naval Operations updates the Navy's performance evaluation system policy to identify and define all traits by which officers are evaluated. (Recommendation 7)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Chief of Naval Operations develops a mechanism, such as a signature block on the evaluation report, to acknowledge that competencies and expectations were communicated as part of the Navy's performance evaluation process. (Recommendation 8)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure the Commandant of the Marine Corps develops a mechanism, such as a signature block on the evaluation report, to acknowledge that competencies and expectations were communicated as part of the Marine Corps' performance evaluation process. (Recommendation 9)

The Secretary of the Army should assess the design, implementation, and outcomes associated with the Army's forced distribution model and consider alternatives as necessary based on the findings of the assessment. (Recommendation 10)

The Secretary of the Army should revise the Army's performance evaluation system policy to require the provision of performance feedback to all officers at key points in the process, including following the completion of a performance evaluation report. (Recommendation 11)

The Secretary of the Army should develop a mechanism, such as a signature block on the Army's evaluation report, to capture the provision of performance feedback to officers with their performance evaluation report. (Recommendation 12)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps revises the Marine Corps' performance evaluation system policy to require the provision of performance feedback to officers following the completion of a performance evaluation report. (Recommendation 13)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps develops a mechanism, such as a signature block on the evaluation report, to capture that feedback is provided to officers at all key points in the Marine Corps' process. (Recommendation 14)

The Secretary of the Army should develop a plan for regularly evaluating the Army's performance evaluation system, including system tools and processes. (Recommendation 15)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Chief of Naval Operations develops a plan for regularly evaluating the Navy's performance evaluation system, including system tools and processes. (Recommendation 16)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure the Commandant of the Marine Corps develops a plan for regularly evaluating the Marine Corps' performance evaluation system, including system tools and processes. (Recommendation 17)

The Secretary of the Air Force should develop a plan for regularly evaluating the Air Force's performance evaluation system, including system tools and processes. (Recommendation 18)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Chief of Naval Operations develops a process to review the results of the Navy's performance evaluation system for bias and accuracy, for example, through reviews of ratings or ratings trends. (Recommendation 19)

The Secretary of the Air Force should develop a process to review the results of the Air Force's performance evaluation system for bias and accuracy, for example, through reviews of ratings or ratings trends. (Recommendation 20)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to DOD for review and comment. In its written comments, reproduced in their entirety in appendix VIII, DOD concurred with 19 of the report's 20 recommendations and partially concurred with one recommendation. DOD also provided technical comments, which we have incorporated as appropriate.

In partially concurring with recommendation five, which is that the Air Force should revise its performance evaluation system policy or guidance to ensure that raters explicitly align officer expectations with organizational goals, the Air Force stated that its evaluation system aligns

with both Air Force Core Values and the Air Force's organizational goals. Specifically, the Air Force noted that its organizational goals are identified in Air Force Instruction 1-2, *Commander Responsibilities*, and Department of the Air Force Instruction 90-302, *The Inspection System of the Department of the Air Force*, as major graded areas that commanders and units are expected to achieve. These goals include executing the mission, leading people, managing resources, and improving the unit. The Air Force further stated that in addition to establishing the major performance areas as organizational goals, the goals are further defined through the Airman Leadership Qualities as expectations for officers. The Air Force recognized that there can be confusion between the core values and organizational goals as they relate to the evaluation system and noted that the service would examine how to incorporate the requirement most effectively into its policy.

However, Air Force performance evaluation system documentation and the aforementioned instructions neither identify the major performance areas or "graded areas" as organizational goals, nor state that individual performance expectations and organizational goals should align. Further, as noted in our report, goals and values differ in that an organization's goals are end results expected to be achieved within a specified period, while its values are the moral code of an organization. Therefore, we are encouraged by the Air Force's stated commitment to examine how to clarify its organizational goals and align those goals with officer expectations in policy. By revising its policy to direct raters to explicitly align individual officer performance expectations with organizational goals, the Air Force can better ensure that officers' daily activities and performance are cascading upwards to meet the goals of the organization.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of the Army, the Secretary of the Navy, the Secretary of the Air Force, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and the Chief of Space Operations. In addition, this report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (404) 679-1893 or williamsk@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on

the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix IX.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kristy E. Williams". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'K'.

Kristy Williams
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management

List of Committees

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman
The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Jon Tester
Chair
The Honorable Susan M. Collins
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Defense
United States Senate

The Honorable Mike Rogers
Chairman
The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

The Honorable Ken Calvert
Chairman
The Honorable Betty McCollum
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Defense
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Questionnaire for Interviews with Statutory Promotion Board Members

To obtain the perspectives of promotion selection board members regarding their experiences serving on a board and the role of performance evaluations in officer promotion selection, we interviewed 19 officers from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force who volunteered to speak with us about their experiences. We requested lists of officers from the military services. We then contacted more than 80 officers who previously served on a statutory promotion selection board and scheduled interviews with those who responded to our request and met the criteria. Our criteria for participation were that officers be active duty commissioned officers at the time of the interview and have served on at least one commissioned officer statutory promotion selection board since January 1, 2020. Further details about our methodology for conducting these interviews can be found in appendix III. Responses to selected interview questions are displayed in appendix VI.

This appendix includes the interview questionnaire we used to interview commissioned officer promotion selection board members regarding their experiences serving on a board and with performance evaluations. It shows the key content of the interview questions; however, the format of selected questions and response options have been changed for readability in this report. In addition, some of the instructions to interviewers are not shown for brevity. Questions without response options were open-ended.

**Appendix I: Questionnaire for Interviews with
Statutory Promotion Board Members**

Background Questions

Military Service

1. Are you currently an active duty commissioned officer?
Yes
No
2. How many years have you served as an active duty commissioned officer?
Two years or less
Three to five years
Six to nine years
10 to 19 years
20 years or more
3. Have you served on a commissioned officer promotion selection board since January 1st, 2020? By officer promotion selection boards, we mean a board of commissioned officers to evaluate and recommend qualified officers for promotion to a higher grade.

Yes
No
4. What military service are you currently a member of?
Army
Marine Corps
Navy
Air Force
Space Force
5. What is your current grade?
O-4
O-5
O-6
O-7
O-8
O-9
O-10
Other (specify)

Other: _____

Demographic Information

6. What is your gender identity?
Male

**Appendix I: Questionnaire for Interviews with
Statutory Promotion Board Members**

Female

Non-binary

Other

Prefer not to answer.....

7. Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

Yes

No

Prefer not to answer....

8. Now I would like to ask you about your race or races. I will read the options for you and you can select one or multiple races. Would you say your race is White, Black or African-American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or some other race?

White

Black or African-American.....

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

Don't know

Prefer not to answer.....

Other (specify).....

Promotion Selection Board History

9. How many statutory officer promotion selection boards have you served on during your entire career?

a. In what month and year did you most recently serve on an officer promotion selection board?

b. Have you ever served as the board president for an officer promotion selection board?

Yes

No

Don't know.....

Prefer not to answer ...

Officer Promotion Selection Board Process

10. How, if at all, did you prepare for the board prior to the board convening?

**Appendix I: Questionnaire for Interviews with
Statutory Promotion Board Members**

11. What information, if any, was provided to you either before or during board proceedings about the individual officers your board was considering for promotion? For example, you may have received the officers' performance evaluations.

- _____
- Officer performance evaluation reports
 - Educational transcripts
 - Disciplinary record
 - Letter from the officer
 - Letter(s) from others on officer's behalf
 - Other

a. Besides information about individual officers, was any other information provided to you before or during board proceedings?

- Yes
- No → *Skip to Question 12*
- Don't know → *Skip to Question 12*
- Prefer not to answer → *Skip to Question 12*

b. What other information was provided to you?

- _____
- Precept language from DOD
 - Precept language from military department/service
 - DOD promotion board policy documents or memos
 - Service promotion board policy documents or memos
 - Other

12. Could you describe how the information on the officers being considered for promotion was provided to you before or during board proceedings?

- _____
- Orally
 - Electronically
 - Packets of written information or documents
 - Other

- _____
- Don't know/don't recall
 - Prefer not to answer

**Appendix I: Questionnaire for Interviews with
Statutory Promotion Board Members**

13. Do you feel you did or did not receive enough information to inform your decisions of whether or not to recommend officers for promotion?

Enough information/Yes

Not enough information/No ..

Don't know.....

Prefer not to answer

a. What additional information, if anything, would you like to see provided to officer promotion selection boards to inform decisions about whether to recommend an officer for promotion or not?

14. What information was the most useful to you when deciding whether to recommend an officer for promotion or not?

All or part of officer performance evaluation reports.....

Educational transcripts

Disciplinary record.....

Letter from the officer

Letter(s) from others on officer's behalf.....

Oral instructions provided to board

Precept language from DOD

Precept language from military department/service

DOD promotion board policy documents.....

Service promotion board policy documents

None.....

Other.....

15. Do you feel you did or did not have enough time to consider information on each officer when deciding whether to recommend an officer for promotion or not?

Had enough time/Yes.....

Did not have enough time/No

Don't know.....

Prefer not to answer..... → *Skip to text before Question 16*

a. Can you explain your answer?

Usefulness of Officer Performance Evaluations to Promotion Selection Board Information

16. Did you review performance evaluation reports of the officers you were considering for promotion?

**Appendix I: Questionnaire for Interviews with
Statutory Promotion Board Members**

Yes → *Skip to Question 17*

No → *Continue to "a"*

Don't know..... → *Skip to Question 22*

Prefer not to answer → *Skip to Question 22*

a. Could you elaborate on why you did not review performance evaluation reports?

→ *Skip to Question 22*

17. Can you describe what part or parts of an officer's performance evaluation reports you reviewed when deciding whether to recommend an officer for promotion?

18. Did you feel that the information contained in officer performance evaluation reports was very useful, useful, somewhat useful, slightly useful, or not useful at all?

Very useful

Useful

Somewhat useful.....

Slightly useful

Not useful at all.....

Don't know.....

Prefer not to answer

a. Can you explain why you picked [*insert officer response here*]?

19. Did you find any part of the officer performance evaluation reports more useful than others when deciding whether to recommend an officer for promotion?

Yes

No

Don't know → *Skip to Question 20*

Prefer not to answer..... → *Skip to Question 20*

a. Can you explain your answer?

b. What part of the officer performance evaluation reports did you find most useful when deciding whether to recommend an officer for promotion?

20. Do you feel that the officer performance evaluation reports you reviewed did or did not provide enough detail to inform your decision whether to recommend an officer for promotion?

Did provide enough detail/Yes → *Skip to Question 21*

**Appendix I: Questionnaire for Interviews with
Statutory Promotion Board Members**

Did not provide enough detail/No.

Don't know.....

Prefer not to answer..... → *Skip to Question 21*

a. Can you explain your answer?

21. What additional information, if anything, would be helpful to include in officer performance evaluation reports to better inform decisions about whether to recommend an officer for promotion?

22. To your knowledge, are there specific words or phrases raters include in the narrative section of a performance evaluation report to influence a promotion selection board's decision of whether to recommend an officer for promotion?

Yes

No → *If they stated they did not review performance evaluation reports in Question 16, skip to Question 24, otherwise skip to text before Question 23.*

Don't know → *If they stated they did not review performance evaluation reports in Question 16, skip to Question 24, otherwise skip to text before Question 23.*

Prefer not to answer. → *If they stated they did not review performance evaluation reports in Question 16, skip to Question 24, otherwise skip to text before Question 23.*

a. Could you describe some specific words or phrases raters include in the narrative section to influence a promotion selection board's decision about whether or not to recommend an officer for promotion?

b. Could you describe how you learned which words or phrases are used to influence a promotion selection board decisions about whether or not to recommend an officer for promotion?

c. Considering your experience serving on a promotion selection board, did use of those words or phrases influence the promotion selection board's decision about whether to recommend an officer for promotion?

Yes

No

Don't know.....

Prefer not to answer

→ *If they stated they did not review evaluation reports in Question 16, skip to Question 24. Else, continue.*

**Appendix I: Questionnaire for Interviews with
Statutory Promotion Board Members**

23. For an individual officer being considered for promotion, did you weight all the performance evaluation reports equally or did you weight some of the officer's evaluation reports more heavily than others?

- Weighted equally → *Skip to Question 24*
- Weighted some more or less than others.....
- Don't know..... → *Skip to Question 24*
- Prefer not to answer → *Skip to Question 24*

a. What factors caused you to weight some performance evaluation reports more heavily than others?

- Report covered service in a combat role
- Report covered service in an operational role
- Report covered service in command of others
- Report covered service in a joint environment
- Report covered service in an administrative role.....
- Report covered enrollment in an educational program.....
- Reported included service as an instructor for an educational program..
- Rank of the rater/senior rater
- Rater was in a different service
- Rater was a civilian/non-DOD.....
- Rater was in another military service
- Specific text included in the evaluation report
- Recency of evaluation report.....
- Other.....

b. Why did these factors cause you to weight some performance evaluation reports more heavily than others?

c. Are there any factors that caused you to weight a performance evaluation report less heavily than others when deciding to recommend an officer for promotion?

- Yes
- No → *Skip to Question 24*
- Don't know..... → *Skip to Question 24*
- Prefer not to answer → *Skip to Question 24*

d. What were those factors?

**Appendix I: Questionnaire for Interviews with
Statutory Promotion Board Members**

Fairness of Promotion Boards and Board Processes

24. Now I would like to ask about how fair or unfair you feel your service's officer promotion board processes are overall. Would you say your service's officer promotion board processes are very fair, fair, somewhat fair, slightly fair, or not at all fair?

- Very fair...
- Fair
- Somewhat fair
- Slightly fair.....
- Not at all fair
- Don't know.....
- Prefer not to answer

a. Can you explain why you said *[insert officer's response here]*?

25. I would now like to ask you about how well your service's promotion selection board processes identify the right officers to be recommended for promotion overall. Would you say your service's promotion selection board processes identify the right officers to be recommended for promotion very well, well, somewhat well, slightly well, or not at all well?

- Very well...
- Well
- Somewhat well
- Slightly well.....
- Not at all well.....
- Don't know.....
- Prefer not to answer ..

a. Can you explain why you said *[insert officer's response here]*?

b. *[If responds anything other than very well or well, ask:]* How could your service improve its promotion selection board processes to better select officers for promotion?

Wrap Up

26. If you could change anything about your service's officer promotion board processes, what would you change, if anything?

27. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience serving on a promotion selection board that we did not already cover?

Appendix II: Questionnaire for Interviews with Active Duty Commissioned Officers on Performance Evaluation Systems

To obtain the perspectives of active duty commissioned officers regarding their experiences with their services' performance evaluation systems, we interviewed 31 officers from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force who volunteered to speak with us about their experiences. We requested lists of officers in grades O-1 through O-6 from the military services. We then contacted more than 100 officers and scheduled interviews with those who responded to our request and met the criteria. Our criterion for participation was that officers be active duty commissioned officers at the time of the interview. Further details about our methodology for conducting these interviews can be found in appendix III. Responses to selected interview questions are displayed in appendix VII.

This appendix includes the interview questionnaire used to interview active duty commissioned officers regarding their experiences with performance evaluations. It shows the key content of the interview questions; however, the format of selected questions and response options have been changed for readability in this report. In addition, some of the instructions to interviewers are not shown for brevity. Questions without response options were open-ended.

**Appendix II: Questionnaire for Interviews with
Active Duty Commissioned Officers on
Performance Evaluation Systems**

Background Questions

Military Service

1. Are you currently an active duty commissioned officer?

Yes

No.....

2. How many years have you served as a commissioned officer?

Two years or less

Three to five years

Six to nine years.....

10 to 19 years

20 years or more

3. What military service are you currently a member of?

Army

Marine Corps.....

Navy

Air Force.....

Space Force.....

4. What is your current grade?

O-1

O-2

O-3

O-4

O-5

O-6

Other (specify).....

Other: _____

5. What is your current career field? For example, are you a pilot, a quartermaster, etc.?

6. Since January 1st 2022, have you been deployed, been on temporary duty assignment (TDY), or on sea-duty longer than 30 consecutive days?

Yes

No.....

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Active Duty Commissioned Officers on
Performance Evaluation Systems**

Demographic Information

7. What is your gender identity?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary.....
- Other
- Prefer not to answer.....

8. Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

- Yes
- No.....
- Prefer not to answer....

9. Now I would like to ask you about your race or races. I will read the options for you and you can select one or multiple races. Would you say your race is White, Black or African-American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific islander, or some other race?

- White
- Black or African-American.....
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- Don't know
- Prefer not to answer.....
- Other (specify).....

Performance Evaluation History

10. Have you received at least one performance evaluation report as a commissioned officer since January 1st 2022?

- Yes
- No..... → Skip to Next Section "Feedback Received on Job Performance," text before Question 14
- Don't know → Skip to Next Section "Feedback Received on Job Performance," text before Question 14
- Prefer not to answer..... → Skip to Next Section "Feedback Received on Job Performance," text before Question 14

a. In what month and year did you receive your most recent officer performance evaluation report?

**Appendix II: Questionnaire for Interviews with
Active Duty Commissioned Officers on
Performance Evaluation Systems**

- _____
- b. Since January 1st 2022, how many officer performance evaluation reports have you received?

_____ → *If they have received only one officer performance evaluation report, skip to text before Question 11*

- c. My next question is about how frequently you have received an officer performance evaluation report, for example, annually or some other frequency. Since January 1st, 2022 how frequently have you received an officer performance evaluation report?

Check all boxes that apply

Annually...

Twice per year...

Other (specify)...

- _____
11. Now, I would like to ask you specifically about your most recent performance evaluation report. Did you provide any input to your rater for the most recent performance evaluation report you received? For example, preparing narrative text or a self-assessment of your performance for your rater to consider would be an example of input.

Yes

No → *Skip to the text above Question 12*

Don't know → *Skip to the text above Question 12*

Prefer not to answer... → *Skip to the text above Question 12*

- a. Can you describe the input you provided on your performance to your rater? For example, you may have provided a summary of your accomplishments.

- _____
- b. Do you believe the input you provided helped inform the rating you received from your rater?

Yes

No

Don't know.

Prefer not to answer..

- c. Could you explain your response?
- _____

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Active Duty Commissioned Officers on
Performance Evaluation Systems**

12. Now I'd like to ask you about the fairness of your most recent overall officer performance evaluation. Would you say your most recent overall officer performance evaluation was very fair, fair, somewhat fair, slightly fair, or not at all fair?

- Very Fair... → Skip to Question 13
- Fair → Skip to Question 13
- Somewhat Fair.....
- Slightly fair.....
- Not at all fair...
- Don't know..... → Skip to Question 13
- Prefer not to answer.... → Skip to Question 13

a. What, if anything was unfair about your most recent performance evaluation?

13. I am now going to ask you about the accuracy of your most recent officer performance evaluation. Did your most recent officer performance evaluation reflect your performance very accurately, accurately, somewhat accurately, slightly accurately, or not at all accurately?

- Very accurately..... → Skip to text before Question 14
- Accurately → Skip to text before Question 14
- Somewhat accurately.....
- Slightly accurately
- Not at all accurately.....
- Don't know → Skip to text before Question 14
- Prefer not to answer..... → Skip to text before Question 14

a. What, if anything, was not accurate about your most recent performance evaluation?

Feedback Received on Job Performance

14. When you received your most recent performance evaluation report, did you also receive job performance feedback from your rater?

- Yes.....
- No..... → Skip to text before Question 19
- Don't know → Skip to text before Question 19
- Prefer not to answer..... → Skip to text before Question 19

a. Can you explain your response?

b. [Only ask if Yes to 14] How did your rater provide this feedback?

**Appendix II: Questionnaire for Interviews with
Active Duty Commissioned Officers on
Performance Evaluation Systems**

15. I am now going to ask you some questions about the timeliness of the feedback you received accompanying your most recent performance evaluation report. Would you say it was very timely, timely, somewhat timely, slightly timely, or not at all timely?

- Very timely → *Skip to Question 16*
- Timely..... → *Skip to Question 16*
- Somewhat timely.....
- Slightly timely
- Not at all timely.....
- Don't know → *Skip to Question 16*
- Prefer not to answer.. → *Skip to Question 16*

a. What factors have affected the timeliness of the feedback you received accompanying your most recent performance evaluation report?

-
- Operational tempo
 - Change of rater
 - Number of direct reports rater evaluates
 - Deployment (officer)
 - Deployment (rater)
 - TDY (officer)
 - TDY (rater)
 - Leave (officer)
 - Leave (rater).....
 - Educational program (officer)
 - Educational program (rater)
 - Change of duty station (officer)
 - Change of duty station (rater).....
 - Don't know.
 - Prefer not to answer
 - Other (specify)
-

16. Now I would like to ask you about the how clear or not clear the feedback you received accompanying your most recent performance evaluation report was. Would you say the feedback was very clear, clear, somewhat clear, slightly clear, or not at all clear?

- Very clear... → *Skip to Question 17*
- Clear..... → *Skip to Question 17*
- Somewhat clear
- Slightly clear.....
- Not at all clear

**Appendix II: Questionnaire for Interviews with
Active Duty Commissioned Officers on
Performance Evaluation Systems**

Don't know → Skip to Question 17

Prefer not to answer.... → Skip to Question 17

- a. What was not clear about the feedback you received accompanying your most recent performance evaluation, if anything?

17. Now I would like to ask you about how actionable or not actionable the feedback you received accompanying your most recent performance evaluation report was. By actionable I mean how well you could act on it. Would you say the feedback was very actionable, actionable, somewhat actionable, slightly actionable, or not at all actionable?

Very actionable → Skip to Question 18

Actionable → Skip to Question 18

Somewhat actionable.....

Slightly actionable

Not at all actionable.....

Don't know → Skip to Question 18

Prefer not to answer..... → Skip to Question 18

- a. What was not actionable about the feedback you received accompanying your most recent performance evaluation, if anything?

18. My next question is about how valuable or not valuable to your professional development as an officer the feedback you received accompanying your most recent performance evaluation report was. Would you say the feedback was very valuable, valuable, somewhat valuable, slightly valuable, or not at all valuable?

Very valuable → Skip to Question 19

Valuable → Skip to Question 19

Somewhat valuable.....

Slightly valuable

Not at all valuable.....

Don't know → Skip to Question 19

Prefer not to answer.... → Skip to Question 19

- a. What was not valuable about the feedback you received accompanying your most recent performance evaluation, if anything?

- b. What, if anything, would make the feedback more valuable?

19. Did you receive any feedback on your job performance since January 1st 2022 other than the feedback that accompanied your performance evaluation report?

Yes

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Active Duty Commissioned Officers on
Performance Evaluation Systems**

No..... → Skip to text above Question 20

Don't know → Skip to text above Question 20

Prefer not to answer..... → Skip to text above Question 20

I'm now going to ask you a series of questions about the feedback you received on your job performance that did not accompany your performance evaluation report.

a. Was any of the feedback you received provided as part of ongoing or scheduled feedback sessions?

Yes → Skip to "d"

No..... → Skip to "d"

Don't know..... → Skip to "d"

Prefer not to answer → Skip to "d"

b. Was any of the feedback you received provided in response to a specific action?

Yes → Skip to "f"

No..... → Skip to "f"

Don't know..... → Skip to "f"

Prefer not to answer → Skip to "f"

c. Were there any other times or situations in which feedback was provided that did not accompany your performance evaluation report?

Yes → Skip to "h"

No..... → Skip to "i"

Don't know..... → Skip to "i"

Prefer not to answer → Skip to "i"

d. Could you describe when this feedback was provided?

e. Since January 1st 2022, did you receive any documentation of the feedback you received, excluding your performance evaluation report?

Yes → Skip to "k"

No..... → Skip to text before Question 20

Don't know..... → Skip to text before Question 20

Prefer not to answer → Skip to text before Question 20

f. Could you describe this documentation?

20. Since January 1st 2022, which of the following types of feedback would you say has been **most valuable** to your professional development: Feedback that accompanied performance evaluation reports, feedback provided during ongoing or scheduled sessions that did not accompany a performance evaluation report, feedback provided in response to a specific action, or some other type of feedback?

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- Feedback that accompanied performance evaluation reports
- Feedback provided during ongoing or scheduled feedback sessions that did not accompany a performance evaluation report
- Feedback provided in response to a specific action
- Don't know
- Prefer not to answer
- Other type of feedback (specify)

21. Considering all types of feedback you receive and including feedback that accompanied your performance evaluation reports, what, if anything, would make the feedback you receive on your performance more valuable to your overall professional development as an officer? _____

Expectations

22. Consistent with service policies, your performance is evaluated against performance criteria by your rater. Since January 1st, 2022, have those performance criteria been communicated to you?

- Yes...
- No... → *Skip to Rater-Specific Questions Section, text before Question 23*
- Don't know → *Skip to Rater-Specific Questions Section, text before Question 23*
- Prefer not to answer → *Skip to Rater-Specific Questions Section, text before Question 23*

a. Now I am going to ask you about how well those performance criteria used by your rater to evaluate your performance have been communicated to you. Since January 1st 2022, would you say that the performance criteria have been communicated very well, communicated well, communicated somewhat well, communicated slightly well, or not communicated well at all?

- Communicated very well
- Communicated well
- Communicated somewhat well
- Communicated slightly well
- Not communicated well at all
- Don't know → *Skip to Rater-Specific Questions Section, text before Question 23*
- Prefer not to answer → *Skip to Rater-Specific Questions Section, text before Question 23*

b. Can you explain your answer?

c. *[If responds anything other than "communicated very well" in a]* How, if at all, would you improve how the performance criteria are communicated to you?

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Active Duty Commissioned Officers on
Performance Evaluation Systems**

d. My next question is about the overall relevance of the criteria your performance is evaluated against by your rater to your job. Would you say the performance criteria are very relevant, relevant, somewhat relevant, slightly relevant, or not at all relevant?

Very relevant.....

Relevant.....

Somewhat relevant....

Slightly relevant.....

Not at all relevant.....

Don't know..... → *Skip to Rater-Specific Questions Section, text before Question 23*

Prefer not to answer.. → *Skip to Rater-Specific Questions Section, text before Question 23*

e. Can you explain your answer?

Rater-Specific Questions

Now, I would like to ask you about any performance evaluation reports you may have prepared for another officer.

23. Have you prepared a performance evaluation report for another commissioned officer since January 1st, 2022?

Yes...

No..... → *Skip to "Overall Thoughts on the Performance Evaluation System" Section, text before Question 37*

Don't know..... → *Skip to "Overall Thoughts on the Performance Evaluation System" Section, text before Question 37*

Prefer not to answer.. → *Skip to "Overall Thoughts on the Performance Evaluation System" Section, text before Question 37*

Rating History

24. For how many commissioned officers are you currently responsible for evaluating performance and preparing performance evaluation reports as the rater?

Feedback Given

25. Since January 1st, 2022, have you provided performance feedback to another officer you evaluated to accompany their performance evaluation report?

Yes...

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- No..... → Skip to text above Question 27
- Don't know → Skip to text above Question 27
- Prefer not to answer..... → Skip to text above Question 27

26. Since January 1st 2022, do you feel any factors affected your ability to deliver timely performance feedback to the officers whose performance you evaluated accompanying their performance evaluation reports?

- Yes...
- No..... → Skip to text above Question 27
- Don't know → Skip to text above Question 27
- Prefer not to answer..... → Skip to text above Question 27

a. What were the factors that affected the timeliness of the feedback you provided?

- Operational tempo
- Change of rater
- Number of direct reports rater evaluates
- Deployment (officer)
- Deployment (rater)
- TDY (officer)
- TDY (rater)
- Leave (officer)
- Leave (rater).....
- Educational program (officer)
- Educational program (rater)
- Change of duty station (officer)
- Change of duty station (rater).....
- Don't know.
- Prefer not to answer
- Other (specify)

27. Excluding any feedback you provided accompanying their performance evaluation reports, did you provide any other performance feedback to the officers you are responsible for evaluating since January 1st 2022?

- Yes
- No..... → Skip to text before Question 28
- Don't know → Skip to text before Question 28
- Prefer not to answer.... → Skip to text before Question 28

a. Did you provide any feedback during ongoing or scheduled feedback sessions?

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Yes → Skip to "c"

No → Skip to "c"

Don't know → Skip to "c"

Prefer not to answer → Skip to "c"

b. Did you provide any feedback in response to a specific action?

Yes → Skip to "e"

No → Skip to "e"

Don't know → Skip to "e"

Prefer not to answer → Skip to "e"

c. Were there any other times or situations in which you provided feedback that did not accompany officers' performance evaluation reports?

Yes → Skip to "g"

No → Skip to "h"

Don't know → Skip to "h"

Prefer not to answer → Skip to "h"

d. When did you provide this feedback?

e. Since January 1st 2022, did you provide any documentation of the feedback you provided to the officers you are responsible for evaluating?

Yes → Skip to "j"

No → Skip to text before Question 28

Don't know → Skip to text before Question 28

Prefer not to answer → Skip to text before Question 28

f. Could you describe this documentation?

Training on Evaluating Officer Performance and Providing Feedback

28. Have you ever received training, which could include a formal course or a briefing conducted at a unit-, command-, or service-level, on how to evaluate officers' performance, including preparing officer performance evaluation reports?

Yes...

No → Skip to Question 29

Don't know → Skip to Question 29

Prefer not to answer → Skip to Question 29

Other (specify) → Skip to Question 29

Other: _____

a. Can you describe the most recent training you received on how to evaluate officer performance?

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b. In what year did you receive the most recent training on evaluating officer performance?

c. My next question is about how helpful or not helpful any formal training you have received on how to evaluate officers' performance was, overall. Considering all of the training you have ever received on how to evaluate officer performance, overall, would you say it was very helpful, helpful, somewhat helpful, slightly helpful, or not helpful at all?

Very helpful...

Helpful

Somewhat helpful

Slightly helpful

Not helpful at all

Don't know.....

Prefer not to answer → Skip to "e"

d. Could you explain your answer?

e. [If responded anything besides "Very helpful" in "c"] How, if at all, would you recommend improving your service's training related to evaluating officers' performance?

29. Have you ever received training, which could include a formal course or a briefing conducted at a unit-, command-, or service-level, on how to provide feedback to the officers you are responsible for evaluating?

Yes...

No..... → Skip to Question 30

Don't know → Skip to Question 30

Prefer not to answer..... → Skip to Question 30

Other (specify)..... → Skip to Question 30

Other: _____

a. Can you describe the most recent training you received on how to provide feedback to the officers you are responsible for evaluating?

b. In what year did you receive the most recent training on how to provide feedback to the officers you are responsible for evaluating?

c. My next question is about how helpful or not helpful any formal training you received on providing feedback to officers was, overall. Considering all of the

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training you have ever received on how to provide feedback to officers, overall, would you say it was very helpful, helpful, somewhat helpful, slightly helpful, or not helpful at all?

- Very helpful...
- Helpful
- Somewhat helpful
- Slightly helpful
- Not helpful at all
- Don't know.....
- Prefer not to answer → *Skip to "e"*

d. Could you explain your answer?

e. [If responded anything besides "Very helpful" in "c"] How, if at all, would you improve your service's training related to providing feedback to officers?

30. Have you ever received guidance related to preventing rating inflation? This could include both formal and informal guidance.

- Yes...
- No..... → *Skip to Rater Perceptions Section, text before Question 31*
- Don't know → *Skip to Rater Perceptions Section, text before Question 31*
- Prefer not to answer.. → *Skip to Rater Perceptions Section, text before Question 31*
- Other (specify)..... → *Skip to Rater Perceptions Section, text before Question 31*

Other: _____

a. Could you describe that guidance?

b. How was the guidance provided to you?

c. When was the guidance provided to you?

d. My next question is about how helpful or not helpful the guidance you received on preventing rating inflation was in terms of understanding how to prevent rating inflation in officer performance evaluations. Would you say the guidance you received was very helpful, helpful, somewhat helpful, slightly helpful, or not at all helpful?

- Very helpful...
- Helpful
- Somewhat helpful.....
- Slightly helpful

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- Not at all helpful...
Don't know...
Prefer not to answer → Skip to "F"

e. Can you explain your answer?

f. [If responded anything besides "Very helpful" in "d"] How, if at all, could your service's guidance related to preventing rating inflation be improved?

Rater Perceptions of the Officer Performance Evaluation System

31. Overall, since January 1st 2022, in your role as a rater, do you feel that you were or were not able to devote sufficient time to evaluating the performance of each officer you were responsible for evaluating?

- Were/Yes.....
Sometimes
Were not/No
Don't know
Prefer not to answer..... → Skip to Question 32

a. Can you explain your answer?

32. Overall, since January 1st 2022, in your role as a rater, do you feel you did or did not have adequate knowledge of the performance of each officer you evaluated to prepare a performance evaluation report for those officers?

- Did/Yes.....
Sometimes
Did not/No
Don't know
Prefer not to answer..... → Skip to Question 33

a. Can you explain your answer?

33. Overall, do you feel that your service's officer performance evaluation system does or does not allow you to accurately capture the performance of the officers you are responsible for evaluating?

- Does/Yes.....
Sometimes
Does not/No
Don't know
Prefer not to answer → Skip to Question 34

**Appendix II: Questionnaire for Interviews with
Active Duty Commissioned Officers on
Performance Evaluation Systems**

a. Can you explain your answer?

34. Overall, are there any aspects of your service's officer performance evaluation system that you feel hinder your ability to accurately capture the performance of the officers you are responsible for evaluating?

- Yes...
- No..... → *Skip to "b"*
- Don't know → *Skip to text before Question 35*
- Prefer not to answer..... → *Skip to text before Question 35*

a. What aspects of your service's officer performance evaluation system do you feel hinder your ability to accurately capture the performance of the officers you are responsible for evaluating?

b. Can you explain your answer?

35. Have you served as a senior rater for another commissioned officer since January 1st, 2022?

- Yes...
- No.....
- Don't know
- Prefer not to answer.....

36. Overall, as a rater [*and senior rater*], *if just answered yes to 35*, do you feel your service's officer performance evaluation system allows you to distinguish between high, average, and low performers when evaluating officer performance?

- Yes...
- Sometimes
- No.....
- Don't know
- Prefer not to answer..... → *Skip to text before Question 37*

a. Can you explain your answer?

Overall Thoughts on Performance Evaluation System

37. Now I am going to ask you about how fair or unfair you feel your service's officer performance evaluation system is overall. Would you say your service's officer performance evaluation system is very fair, fair, somewhat fair, slightly fair, or not at all fair?

- Very fair...
- Fair.....

**Appendix II: Questionnaire for Interviews with
Active Duty Commissioned Officers on
Performance Evaluation Systems**

- Somewhat fair
- Slightly fair.....
- Not at all fair
- Don't know
- Prefer not to answer.... → *Skip to Question 38*

a. Can you explain your answer?

38. Now I am going to ask you about how transparent or not transparent you feel your service's officer performance evaluation system is overall. Would you say it is very transparent, transparent, somewhat transparent, slightly transparent, or not at all transparent?

- Very transparent...
- Transparent.....
- Somewhat transparent.....
- Slightly transparent
- Not at all transparent.....
- Don't know
- Prefer not to answer..... → *Skip to text before Question 39*

a. Can you explain your answer?

39. Overall, would you say your service's decisions about promotions are very much based on performance evaluations, based on performance evaluations, somewhat based on performance evaluations, slightly based on performance evaluations, or not at all based on performance evaluations?

- Very much based on performance evaluations...
- Based on performance evaluations.....
- Somewhat based on performance
- Slightly based on performance evaluations
- Not at all based on performance evaluations.....
- Don't know
- Prefer not to answer..... → *Skip to "b"*

a. Can you explain your answer?

b. Besides officer performance, are there any other factors you believe your service's officer promotion system is based on?

- Yes.....
- No..... → *Skip to Question 40*

**Appendix II: Questionnaire for Interviews with
Active Duty Commissioned Officers on
Performance Evaluation Systems**

Don't know..... → *Skip to Question 40*

Prefer not to answer → *Skip to Question 40*

c. What are those other factors?

40. Now I am going to ask you about how your service identifies the right people for promotion overall. Would you say your service identifies officers for promotion very well, well, somewhat well, slightly well, or not at all well?

Very well... ..

Well

Somewhat well

Slightly well

Not at all well

Don't know

Prefer not to answer → *Skip to "Wrap Up" Section, Question 41*

a. Can you explain your answer?

Wrap Up

41. If you could change anything about your service's officer performance evaluation system, what would you change?

42. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your service's officer performance evaluation system?

Appendix III: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report examines (1) the extent to which the military services' active duty officer performance evaluation systems incorporate key practices for performance evaluation and (2) how officer performance evaluations inform promotion board determinations and support officer development.

Methods Used to Develop Key Practices for Performance Evaluation

To develop our key practices for performance evaluation, we conducted a literature review. We searched the databases Scopus, ProQuest, EBSCO, ProQuest Dialog, and Harvard Think Tank for scholarly or peer-reviewed material, government reports, books, and other publications containing key practices for performance evaluation. We conducted keyword searches using terms such as "best practices," "key practices," and "leading practices" with "performance evaluation," "performance appraisal," and "performance assessment," and identified 46 sources through that search. Two analysts screened the sources for relevance by independently reviewing the abstracts and reconciling their findings. The analysts excluded 20 sources that did not discuss performance evaluation, resulting in 26 sources. The team also independently found seven sources using online search engines and suggestions from stakeholders to create a list of 33 total sources for further review. Using a selection of five of the remaining 33 sources, two analysts independently created a list of themes of key practices by which to code all sources to determine if they discuss these themes. The analysts then reconciled their lists of themes to create a common list of 15 themes.

Next, two analysts continued screening sources by independently reviewing the full text of each of the remaining 33 sources and made a subjective determination as to whether key practices are discussed. The analysts reconciled their reviews and excluded 15 sources, resulting in 18 sources. Of those 15 that were removed, four were dissertations and theses and 11 did not discuss key practices for performance evaluation. The two analysts then independently coded the remaining 18 sources against the themes to identify how many mentioned a given theme. During the coding process, the analysts removed three sources that did not discuss key practices, resulting in 15 sources. We reviewed the methodologies of the seven sources that contained methodologies requiring review and determined that they were methodologically sound for our purposes. The remaining eight sources either did not contain a methodology or did not require a methodological review. Following the coding of the 15 sources, the two analysts collaboratively reviewed the results of the coding against the 15 themes. Through this review, the analysts reached agreement on a final list of 11 themes, by (1) merging two sets of themes due to overlap in the key concepts and (2) eliminating two themes. One did not meet the criteria for coverage in at least five

sources, and the other was determined to be a separate step in the performance management cycle. The analysts then crafted key practice language based on the content of the source material associated with each of the 11 remaining themes.

We validated the practices internally with legal, methodological, and performance evaluation stakeholders and subject matter experts. We then solicited input from four authors of the 15 sources we reviewed. Of these four, three provided comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. We obtained the views of officials from the Merit Systems Protection Board and incorporated their comments as appropriate. We also solicited input from officials from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), but they declined to comment.¹

We provided the list of key practices to officials from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, the Army, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the Air Force, and the Space Force for comment and incorporated the feedback we received as appropriate. Table 1 presents Department of Defense (DOD) and non-DOD organizations we contacted during our review to address our first objective.

Table 1: DOD and Non-DOD Organizations Contacted by GAO

Organization	Office
Department of Defense (DOD)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Personnel Policy
Department of the Army	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistant Secretary of the Army for Manpower and Reserve Affairs Army Human Resources Command Army Training and Doctrine Command
Department of the Navy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Manpower and Reserve Affairs Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Military Personnel Plans and Policy Division Navy Personnel Command Headquarters Marine Corps, Manpower Management, Records, and Performance Branch

¹OPM officials said that while many of these practices align with statutory and regulatory requirements established for successful operation of performance appraisal systems under title 5, United States Code, OPM cannot meaningfully provide feedback on them in the context of performance evaluation for active duty military officers due to OPM's subject matter expertise and authority being limited to title 5.

Appendix III: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Organization	Office
Department of the Air Force	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Office of the Secretary of the Air Force, Officer Force Management Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel & Services, Directorate of Force Management Policy Space Force Deputy Chief of Space Operations, Force Management Integration Division Space Force Enterprise Talent Management Office
U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Office of Policy and Evaluation
U.S. Office of Personnel Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Merit System Accountability and Compliance

Source: GAO. | GAO-25-106618

This process resulted in the following 11 key practices for performance evaluation:

- 1. Establish and communicate a clear purpose for the performance evaluation system.** Personnel should have a clear understanding of the intent of the system and why the organization is dedicating time and resources to the performance evaluation process.
- 2. Allow for personnel to be directly involved in the performance evaluation process.** A successful performance evaluation system allows for individuals to provide input to the evaluation process, such as by writing self-appraisals or working collaboratively with management to identify performance goals. Active personnel participation helps increase understanding and ownership of the system and belief in its fairness.
- 3. Create and update guidance on procedures for the performance evaluation system.** Instructions and protocols on the performance evaluation system's processes, including personnel roles and responsibilities, should be documented, updated at appropriate intervals, and made accessible to ensure both raters and ratees know how the system functions.
- 4. Provide ongoing training on procedures for the performance evaluation system.** Providing ongoing training on the performance evaluation system supports personnel's understanding of and ability to operate the system in a manner consistent with organizational goals and objectives.
- 5. Align individual performance expectations with organizational goals.** An explicit alignment helps personnel see the connection between their daily activities and organizational goals.

6. Communicate performance expectations and competencies to all personnel. Clear, specific, and measurable expectations tied to specific competencies help drive important organizational goals and measure performance on factors that are directly linked to organizational success.

7. Evaluate performance based on relevant competencies. Competencies define the skills and supporting behaviors that personnel need to effectively contribute to organizational results.

8. Make meaningful distinctions in performance. Effective performance evaluation systems accurately assess personnel at different levels of performance based upon established expectations and competencies. They also provide the necessary objective information and documentation to reward top performers and deal with poor performers.

9. Conduct performance evaluations in a timely fashion. Management should consider the frequency of performance evaluations and conduct them at appropriate intervals. Additionally, performance evaluations should occur close in time to observed performance.

10. Provide timely and actionable feedback on performance to personnel. Effective performance management systems strive to provide candid and constructive feedback with specific, actionable suggestions on performance at key points in the performance evaluation cycle, including after the completion of a performance evaluation. Personnel need to know in a timely manner how they are doing, including both strengths and areas to improve.

11. Regularly evaluate the performance evaluation system and update as needed. Routinely evaluating performance evaluation processes and tools and making necessary changes helps ensure the effectiveness, accuracy, and quality of the system. The results of the performance evaluation system should also be regularly evaluated for bias and accuracy.

Methods Used to Assess the Military Services' Officer Performance Evaluation Systems against Key Practices for Performance Evaluation

We analyzed the extent to which the military services' officer performance evaluation systems are consistent with the 11 key practices for performance evaluation. We scored military service policies and documents based on relevant documentation for each key practice, interviews with military service officials, and written responses to information requests. Our scoring analysis only included the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force. We excluded the Space Force from this

analysis because it was in the process of establishing a performance evaluation system separate from the Air Force during our review.

We performed a multistep analysis of Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force performance evaluation system information and documentation, including responses to a formal request for information. We used a scoring system to conduct our assessment of the services' information and associated documentation for each key practice. The scoring system included the following three scoring categories:

- Fully incorporated: We found complete evidence that satisfied the key practice.
- Partially incorporated: We found evidence that satisfied some portion of the key practice.
- Not incorporated: We found no evidence that satisfied the key practice.

First, two analysts independently reviewed each service's performance evaluation policy and relevant documentation against the key practices for performance evaluation. Table 2 presents the military service policies and other relevant documentation we reviewed as part of this analysis. Based on this first review, the two analysts agreed on an initial score for each key practice for each service.

Table 2: Military Service Policies and Other Documentation Reviewed by GAO

Military service	Document
Army	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Army Regulation 623-3, <i>Evaluation Reporting System</i> (June 14, 2019) • Department of the Army Pamphlet 623-3, <i>Evaluation Reporting System</i> (Sept. 27, 2019) • Department of the Army Form 67-10-1A, <i>Officer Evaluation Report Support Form</i> (Mar. 2019) • Department of the Army Form 67-10-1, <i>Company Grade Plate (O1-O3; WO1-CW2) Officer Evaluation Report</i> (Mar. 2019) • Department of the Army Form 67-10-2, <i>Field Grade Plate (O4-O5; CW3-CW5) Officer Evaluation Report</i> (Mar. 2019) • Department of the Army Form 67-10-3, <i>Strategic Grade Plate (O6) Officer Evaluation Report</i> (Mar. 2019)
Navy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. Navy, Bureau of Naval Personnel Instruction 1610.10F Change Transmittal 1, <i>Navy Performance Evaluation System</i> (Aug. 18, 2022) • Department of the Navy, NAVPERS Form 1610/2, <i>Fitness Report and Counseling Record (W2-O6)</i> (Nov. 2011)

Appendix III: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Military service	Document
Marine Corps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marine Corps Order 1610.7B, <i>Performance Evaluation System (PES)</i> (June 5, 2023) • Department of the Navy, NAVMC 10835, <i>USMC Fitness Report</i> (Rev. July 2011) • Department of the Navy, NAVMC 11297, <i>USMC Fitness Report Addendum Page</i> (Rev. July 2011) • Department of the Navy, NAVMC 2795, <i>USMC User's Guide to Counseling</i> (July 21, 1986) • Marine Corps Order 1500.61, <i>Marine Leader Development</i> (July 28, 2017)
Air Force	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Air Force Instruction 36-2406, <i>Officer and Enlisted Evaluations Systems</i> (Aug. 4, 2023) (incorporating Air Force Guidance Memorandum 2024-01, Jan. 17, 2024) • Air Force Form 715, <i>Officer Performance Brief (O-1 thru O-6)</i> (Feb. 28, 2023) • Air Force Form 724, <i>Airman Comprehensive Assessment Worksheet (2 Lt thru Col)</i> (Feb. 13, 2024) • Department of the Air Force Form 77, <i>Letter of Evaluation</i> (Jan. 8, 2024) • Department of the Air Force Form 709, <i>Promotion Recommendation</i> (Mar. 10, 2023) • Air Force, <i>Writing Guide for Using Airman Leadership Qualities</i>, version 1 (Jan. 10, 2023)

Source: GAO. | GAO-25-106618

Second, the two analysts obtained and independently analyzed written responses to the formal request for information submitted to each of the services, as well as any additional documentation provided to supplement the written responses. The analysts then conducted an additional round of interviews with officials from each of the services to clarify information provided in the written responses. The two analysts identified a second score for each of the key practices for each service based on the new information.

Third, the two analysts independently reconciled their initial two scoring assessments to develop an overall score for each key practice for each service. Each analyst made this determination based on an independent review of the entirety of the information and common decision rules, such as how to score the absence of a key practice element in policy relative to other documentation. Finally, the two analysts met to discuss their individual final scores and reached agreement on a final overall score for each key practice for each service based on the three scoring categories, before validating preliminary scores with another analyst. The analysts presented preliminary scoring results to officials from the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the military services to obtain their perspectives and any additional evidence of service efforts to incorporate the key practices into their performance evaluation systems. As a final step in the scoring of the practices, the two analysts collectively considered any comments and information received with a third analyst and incorporated the new information into the analysis as appropriate.

In addition, we evaluated the military services' performance evaluation systems' processes for communicating individual officer performance expectations and competencies (sixth key practice), for making meaningful distinctions in officer performance (eighth key practice), and for providing performance feedback (tenth key practice) against *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*.² We determined that the risk assessment component of internal control was significant to the eighth key practice, along with the underlying principle that management should define objectives clearly to enable the identification of risks and define risk tolerances. Further, we determined that the control activities component of internal control was significant to the sixth and tenth key practices, along with the underlying principle that management design control activities to achieve objectives and respond to risks.

Methods Used to Describe How the Military Services' Officer Performance Evaluations Inform Promotion Board Determinations and Support Officer Development

To obtain the perspectives of officers and promotion board members on how their respective services' officer performance evaluation systems inform promotion board determinations and support officer development, we interviewed 19 former promotion selection board members and 31 active duty commissioned officers.³ Participants for the promotion board member interviews were randomly selected from lists of officers who had served on at least one statutory promotion selection board since January 1, 2020, that were provided to us by the military services.⁴ We randomly selected officers from each of the services' lists to invite to participate in an interview. We continued this approach until we achieved at least three volunteers for our interviews with promotion board members from each military service. A similar approach was employed to obtain volunteers for our officer interviews. We requested lists of at least 40 active duty commissioned officers who had (1) received their commission prior to January 1, 2022, and (2) represented a diversity of grade, duty location, occupational specialty, gender, and race, to the extent possible. We randomly selected officers from each of the services' lists and sent emails to invite those officers to volunteer for an interview. We repeated this

²GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2014).

³While the promotion board members we interviewed are also active duty officers, there was no overlap between the two groups of interviewees.

⁴The Navy publishes active duty promotion board membership and other details about the service's promotion boards on its website. We selected Navy promotion board members to contact for our interviews from the published lists.

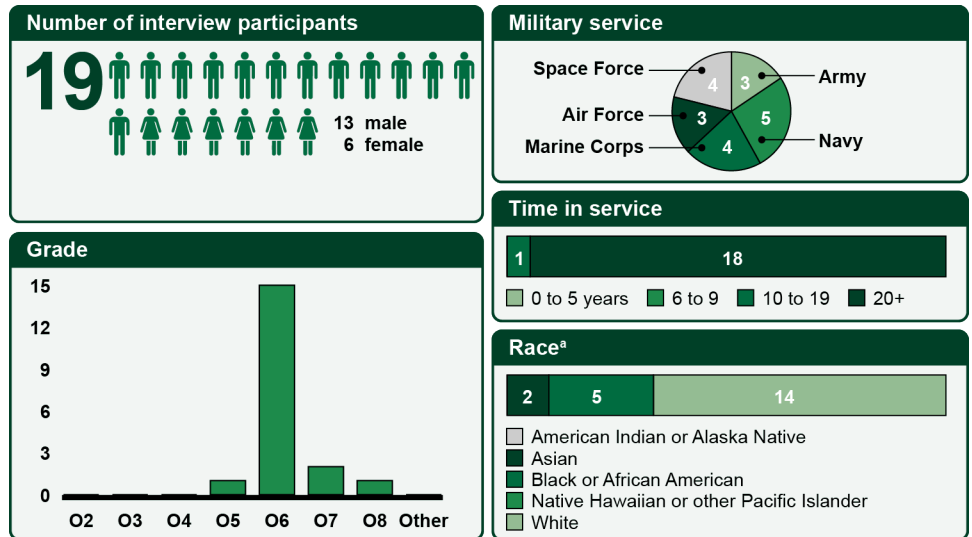
process until we achieved at least five volunteers for our interviews with officers from each military service.

To develop our interview protocols for (1) statutory promotion board members and (2) active duty officers, we reviewed DOD and service policies and interviewed DOD and service officials about the services' military officer performance evaluation systems and promotion processes. A survey specialist helped to design both interview protocols. Prior to interviewing the participants, we pretested the promotion board and officer interview protocols with four individuals who previously served on a statutory promotion board and four former active duty commissioned officers, respectively.⁵ We used the pretests to determine whether (1) the questions were clear, (2) the terms used were precise, (3) participants were able to provide information that we were seeking, and (4) the questions were unbiased. We made changes to the content and format of the interview protocols based on the results of our pretesting.

From September 2023 through February 2024, we sent invitations to 86 promotion board members and 191 other active duty officers seeking volunteers to participate in an interview. We excluded two promotion board members who volunteered because they did not meet our criteria that included (1) being a current active duty commissioned officer and (2) serving on a statutory promotion board for commissioned officers since January 1, 2020. We completed interviews with 19 promotion board members and 31 active duty commissioned officers. Figures 6 and 7 provide additional demographic details about our interview participants.

⁵We did not pretest with a Space Force officer or Space Force promotion board member because the Space Force operated under the Air Force's officer evaluation and promotion policies and procedures since its establishment in 2019 until January 2024.

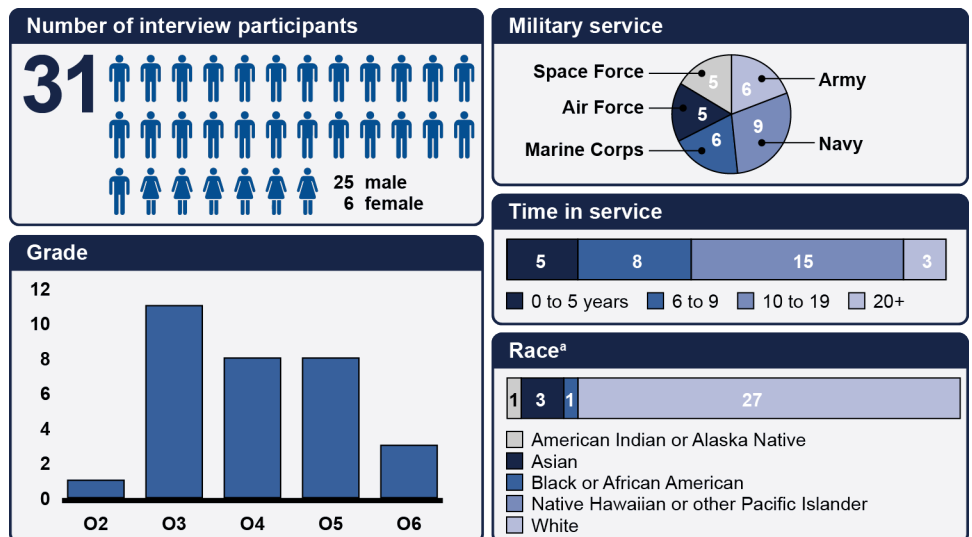
Figure 6: Demographic Information about Interview Participants for GAO Interviews, Promotion Board Members



Source: GAO analysis of interview participant data. | GAO-25-106618

^aInterview participants could identify more than one race. Therefore, the total number of responses to our question about participants' race exceeded 19.

Figure 7: Demographic Information about Interview Participants for GAO Interviews, Active Duty Commissioned Officers



Source: GAO analysis of interview participant data. | GAO-25-106618

^aInterview participants could select more than one race. Therefore, the total number of responses to our question about participants' race exceeded 31.

We asked the participants closed- and open-ended questions on a range of topics regarding officer performance evaluations and the services' officer performance evaluation systems. For the promotion board members we interviewed, these topics included the documentation reviewed to inform promotion selection determinations and the usefulness of that information; the sufficiency of time and level of detail afforded to board members when considering officers for promotion; and the perceived fairness of the promotion board process. For the officers we interviewed about the performance evaluation system, these topics included input provided to raters; the timing and nature of feedback received on job performance; and the fairness and accuracy of prior performance evaluations. The questionnaire we used to conduct interviews with promotion board members is included in its entirety in appendix I, and the questionnaire for active duty commissioned officers is included in its entirety in appendix II.

Due to the sensitivity of the information being discussed, we took several steps to help ensure a confidential and safe environment for participants during the telephone interviews. Specifically, names and contact information provided by volunteers for the purposes of scheduling the interviews were handled confidentially and maintained separately from responses. We did not audio record the interviews. We took notes electronically in Microsoft Word forms, and data were electronically extracted from the Word forms into a comma-delimited file that was then imported into Microsoft Excel and the statistical program SAS for analysis.

To summarize the perspectives obtained through these interviews, we conducted quantitative and qualitative analyses of the interview data. To conduct the quantitative analysis, a data analyst used SAS to identify counts related to closed-ended responses and produced tables using these counts and another data analyst verified the analyses. To conduct the qualitative analysis, we reviewed open-ended questions for examples and anecdotes from the participants. Because we did not select participants using a statistically representative sampling method, the perspectives obtained are nongeneralizable and therefore cannot be projected across DOD or a military service. While the information obtained was not generalizable, it provides perspectives from promotion board members and active duty commissioned officers who were willing to discuss their thoughts about the military services' officer performance evaluation systems and how officer performance evaluations inform promotion board determinations and support officer development.

**Appendix III: Objectives, Scope, and
Methodology**

We conducted this performance audit from February 2023 to November 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix IV: List of Literature Used in the Literature Review and Content Analysis

To develop a list of key practices for performance evaluation, we reviewed the following 15 literature sources. See appendix III for more details about our literature review.

- Burton, Nadine. "Best Practice Performance Management in Today's Commercial Reality." In *Business Psychology in Practice*, edited by Pauline Grant, 246-255. London: Whurr Publishers, 2005.
- Campion, Michael A., Alexis A. Fink, Brian J. Ruggeberg, Linda Carr, Geneva M. Phillips, and Ronald B. Odman. "Doing Competencies Well: Best Practices in Competency Modeling." *Personnel Psychology*, vol. 64, no. 1 (2011): 225-262.
- GAO. *Results-Oriented Cultures: Creating a Clear Linkage between Individual Performance and Organizational Success*. [GAO-03-488](#). Washington, D.C.: March 14, 2003.
- Hinkin, Timothy R. and J. Bruce Tracey. "What Makes It So Great?: An Analysis of Human Resources Practices among Fortune's Best Companies to Work For." *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 2 (May 2010): 158-170.
- Komaki, Judith L. and Michelle Reynard Minnich. "Developing Performance Appraisals: Criteria for What and How Performance is Measured." In *Handbook of Organizational Performance: Behavior Analysis and Management*, edited by Carl Merle Johnson, William K. Redmon, and Thomas C. Mawhinney, 51-80. London: Taylor and Francis, 2013.
- Kondrasuk, Jack N. "The Ideal Performance Appraisal is a Format, Not a Form." *Academy of Strategic Management Journal*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2012): 115-130.
- Longenecker, Clinton O. "Formal Performance Appraisal Functions and Benchmarks of Effectiveness." *Journal of Compensation and Benefits* (July/August 2010): 16-26.
- Longenecker, Clinton O., Laurence S. Fink, and Sheri Caldwell. "Current U.S. trends in formal performance appraisal: practices and opportunities—Part One." *Industrial and Commercial Training*, vol. 46, no. 6 (2014): 321-326.
- Longenecker, Clinton O., Laurence S. Fink, and Sheri Caldwell. "Current US trends in formal performance appraisal: practices and opportunities—Part II." *Industrial and Commercial Training*, vol. 46, no. 7 (2014): 393-399.

**Appendix IV: List of Literature Used in the
Literature Review and Content Analysis**

- Merchant, Kenneth A. "Measuring general managers' performances: Market, accounting and combination-of-measures systems." *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, vol. 19, no. 6 (2006): 893-917.
- Posthuma, Richard A. and Michael A. Campion. "Twenty Best Practices for Just Employee Performance Reviews." *Compensation and Benefits Review* (January/February 2008): 47-55.
- Pulakos, Elaine D. *Performance Management: A New Approach for Driving Business Results*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- Rudman, Richard. *Performance Planning and Review: Making Employee Appraisals Work*, 2nd ed. London: Taylor and Francis, 2020.
- Salas, Eduardo, Michael A Rosen, Janet D. Held, and Johnny J. Weissmuller. "Performance Measurement in Simulation-Based Training: A Review and Best Practices." *Simulation and Gaming*, vol. 40, no. 3 (2009): 328-376.
- United States Office of Personnel Management. *A Handbook for Measuring Employee Performance*. Washington, D.C.: March 2017.

Appendix V: Analysis of the Military Services' Officer Performance Evaluation Systems against GAO's Key Practices for Performance Evaluation

Tables 3 through 6 summarize our analysis of the extent to which the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force active duty officer performance evaluation systems incorporate GAO's 11 key practices for performance evaluation.¹ For a detailed description of the methodology used to develop the key practices and conduct these analyses, see appendix III.

Table 3 summarizes our analysis of the extent to which the Army's performance evaluation system incorporated GAO's key practices for performance evaluation.

Table 3: Analysis of the Army's Performance Evaluation System against GAO's Key Practices for Performance Evaluation

GAO key practices for performance evaluation	Score and summary analysis
<p>(1) Establish and communicate a clear purpose for the performance evaluation system. Personnel should have a clear understanding of the intent of the system and why the organization is dedicating time and resources to the performance evaluation process.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Army's performance evaluation system policy—Army Regulation 623-3—states that the system will evaluate the performance and potential of Army officers.^a The policy identifies two functions for the Army's performance evaluation system. The primary function is to provide information to Headquarters Department of the Army for use in making personnel management decisions. The secondary function is to encourage leader professional development and enhance mission accomplishment through sound senior and/or subordinate relationships.</p>
<p>(2) Allow for personnel to be directly involved in the performance evaluation process. A successful performance evaluation system allows for individuals to provide input to the evaluation process, such as by writing self-appraisals or working collaboratively with management to identify performance goals. Active personnel participation helps increase understanding and ownership of the system and belief in its fairness.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Army allows rated officers to be directly involved in the performance evaluation process. For example, the Army requires the use of the Officer Evaluation Report Support Form, which enables the rated officer to provide documented input to the rater for consideration in preparing the officer performance evaluation report at the end of the rating period.</p>
<p>(3) Create and update guidance on procedures for the performance evaluation system. Instructions and protocols on the performance evaluation system's processes, including personnel roles and responsibilities, should be documented, updated at appropriate intervals, and made accessible to ensure both raters and ratees know how the system functions.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Army has created and updated policy and guidance on the procedures and processes for its performance evaluation system, including Army Regulation 623-3 and Army Pamphlet 623-3.^b The policy outlines the roles and responsibilities of the personnel involved in a soldier's rating chain, while the pamphlet provides guidance on completing tasks in the performance evaluation process. According to Army officials, the Army has updated these documents at routine intervals consistent with Army policy for publishing Army Regulation 25-30, which requires that all Army policies and guidance be updated every 5 years.^c</p>

¹We excluded the Space Force from our analysis of service evaluation systems against our 11 key practices because the Space Force was in the process of implementing a performance evaluation system during the time of our review. Previously, the Space Force followed the Department of the Air Force's evaluation system since its establishment in 2019.

Appendix V: Analysis of the Military Services' Officer Performance Evaluation Systems against GAO's Key Practices for Performance Evaluation

GAO key practices for performance evaluation	Score and summary analysis
<p>(4) Provide ongoing training on procedures for the performance evaluation system. Providing ongoing training on the performance evaluation system supports personnel's understanding of and ability to operate the system in a manner consistent with organizational goals and objectives.</p>	<p>Partially incorporated. The Army provides some performance evaluation-related training, such as briefings provided during required courses of instruction. However, the Army's policy for the performance evaluation system does not specify what training on the performance evaluation system is required, when training is required, and who is responsible for providing training. Additionally, the Army has not taken steps to ensure ongoing training on the system is provided to all officers, such as through the development of a training plan.</p> <p>Army officials stated that some Army officers receive training on the performance evaluation system at certain career milestones, but not on an ongoing basis. For example, Army officials told us that all newly commissioned Army officers receive training on the performance evaluation system during the Army's Basic Officer Leadership Course. They also said that officers selected for command positions receive a briefing on the performance evaluation system from Army Human Resources Command staff. Officials provided examples of briefing slides used during the trainings, which discussed various aspects of the Army's system, including how to write effective narrative comments. Army officials also stated that training materials—including these briefings—are made available on the Army Human Resources Command website.</p> <p>Army performance evaluation system policy requires that commanders and commandants at all levels ensure that rating officials are fully qualified to meet their responsibilities. However, the policy does not specify how commanders and commandants should ensure raters are qualified or that this should be achieved through training. Army officials stated that training on the performance evaluation system is at the discretion of commanders.</p> <p>Army officials further stated that training is the responsibility of Army Training and Doctrine Command. According to Army Training and Doctrine Command officials, training providers such as an Army Center of Excellence may develop training on officer performance evaluations, which may become a model for other commands or centers to use. However, these officials stated that they do not have visibility over who receives such trainings or whether additional training courses are developed and used based off the initial model.</p>
<p>(5) Align individual performance expectations with organizational goals. An explicit alignment helps personnel see the connection between their daily activities and organizational goals.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. Army guidance for the performance evaluation system states that performance objectives should be supportive of unit goals.^d Additionally, Army officials told us that commanders are responsible for establishing organizational goals and objectives, and that raters or senior raters have responsibility for aligning individual performance expectations with those goals as part of their counseling responsibilities. They further stated that organizational goals should also be considered when assessing performance. The officials also told us that the Army's performance evaluation system policy is written in a permissive manner to provide commanders with flexibility to set performance expectations based on their unique mission or needs.</p>

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<p>(6) Communicate performance expectations and competencies to all personnel. Clear, specific, and measurable expectations tied to specific competencies help drive important organizational goals and measure performance on factors that are directly linked to organizational success.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Army requires the use of the Officer Evaluation Report Support Form for all officers through grade O-6 with accompanying counseling. The Officer Evaluation Report Support Form has a section that denotes officer duty title, position, and responsibilities. The form also includes a space for the rated officer to indicate that face-to-face discussions on these topics, including initial counseling discussions, have occurred.</p>
<p>(7) Evaluate performance based on relevant competencies. Competencies define the skills and supporting behaviors that personnel need to effectively contribute to organizational results.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Army’s policy for the performance evaluation system states that rating officials are to assess an officer’s performance and potential against the standards of the Army Leadership Requirements Model. According to the model, Army officers are evaluated against the following six attributes: character, presence, intellect, leads, develops, and achieves.</p>
<p>(8) Make meaningful distinctions in performance. Effective performance evaluation systems accurately assess personnel at different levels of performance based upon established expectations and competencies. They also provide the necessary objective information and documentation to reward top performers and deal with poor performers.</p>	<p>Partially incorporated. Army raters evaluate officer performance by selecting a check box on the performance evaluation report that aligns with a four-tier rating scale. According to Army policy, under the Army’s forced distribution, a rater’s use of the top-level rating cannot exceed 50 percent of officers within each grade of officers evaluated by that rater. Army officials stated that this limit on the top-level rating enforces rater accountability while controlling ratings inflation. According to Army documentation, the rater’s overall distribution of ratings—known as the rater’s profile—is maintained over the rater’s entire career. Officials stated that when evaluating an officer’s performance, raters must consider the performance of all officers of the same grade that a rater previously evaluated, as well as all future officers the rater may evaluate. This may result in a rater assigning a high-performing officer a more average rating to help ensure they reserve space within their profile to assign top-level ratings to future officers.</p> <p>While the use of a forced distribution system is not prohibited for active duty service members, an Office of Personnel Management memorandum states that the forced distribution of civilian employees among levels of performance is prohibited because employees are required to be assessed against documented standards of performance versus an individual’s performance relative to others to ensure accurate individual ratings based on objective criteria.^e</p>
<p>(9) Conduct performance evaluations in a timely fashion. Management should consider the frequency of performance evaluations and conduct them over appropriate intervals. Additionally, performance evaluations should occur close in time to observed performance.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Army’s policy for the performance evaluation system sets a specific time frame for when performance evaluations should be conducted, and it clearly states that an evaluation must be based on observed performance. Additionally, according to the policy, senior raters are responsible for the timeliness and accuracy of the evaluation reports.</p>

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<p>(10) Provide timely and actionable feedback on performance to personnel. Effective performance management systems strive to provide candid and constructive feedback with specific, actionable suggestions on performance at key points in the performance evaluation cycle, including after the completion of a performance evaluation. Personnel need to know in a timely manner how they are doing, including both strengths and areas to improve.</p>	<p>Partially incorporated. The Army has established some limited time frames for the provision of performance feedback to some officer grades, but it has not required that all officer grades receive performance feedback or that feedback be provided following a performance evaluation. Moreover, it does not have a mechanism to help ensure that feedback occurs after a performance evaluation.</p> <p>Army policy states that initial performance feedback, known as counseling, should be provided within the first 30 days of the rating period, and quarterly thereafter, for officers in grades O-1 through O-3. However, according to this policy, initial and ongoing counseling for all other officer grades is provided on an as-needed basis. Army officials stated that once an officer reaches the grade of O-4 or higher, they should understand the Army’s and their supervisor’s expectations. These officials further stated that for grades O-4 and above, counseling should be an informal, ongoing process since formal or documented counseling has the potential to carry a negative connotation. The Army’s performance evaluation system policy also does not require raters to conduct counseling or other performance feedback sessions with officers of all grades after a performance evaluation or identify time frames for conducting such sessions.</p> <p>Additionally, the Army does not have a mechanism—such as a signature block—on its performance evaluation forms to ensure that feedback is delivered after the officer’s performance evaluation. Army policy requires the use of the Officer Evaluation Report Support Form, which includes a section for the rated officer, rater, and senior rater to verify that face-to-face counseling occurred periodically during the evaluation cycle. Separately, the Army’s officer performance evaluation report includes a section for the rater to indicate that the Officer Evaluation Report Support Form was received and used when drafting the officer’s rating. However, the Army’s Officer Evaluation Report Support Form, which documents the dates counseling occurred, is completed prior to the preparation of the officer’s evaluation report by the rating chain and, therefore, cannot capture whether feedback was provided with the performance evaluation report.</p> <p>According to Army officials, a rated officer authenticates—or signs—an evaluation report after all rating officials in the rating chain have conducted and authenticated their assessment. These officials further stated that according to Army policy, the final evaluation report must be submitted for processing to an officer’s permanent record within 90 days of the date the evaluation report was completed. According to the officials, this time frame provides rating officials with the opportunity to present, discuss, and authenticate an evaluation report with a rated officer. The officials further stated that the submission of the final evaluation report represents the acknowledgment that all required steps during the evaluation period were completed. However, as discussed, Army policy does not require raters to provide performance feedback with the performance evaluation report, and there is no mechanism, such as a signature block on the evaluation report, to capture that any feedback occurred.</p>

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<p>(11) Regularly evaluate the performance evaluation system and update as needed. Routinely evaluating performance evaluation processes and tools and making necessary changes helps ensure the effectiveness, accuracy, and quality of the system. The results of the performance evaluation system should also be regularly evaluated for bias and accuracy.</p>	<p>Partially incorporated. According to Army officials, the Army’s most recent evaluation of its performance evaluation system—a directed review—culminated in 2014. Since then, officials told us, the Army’s efforts to evaluate its system have included the processing and final compliance reviews of ratings, and the consideration of ad hoc updates to the system’s policies, processes, and tools. For example, Army officials stated that changes in law, Army doctrine, and DOD policy are considered when proposed to ensure that the performance evaluation system remains current with such changes.</p> <p>According to Army policy, the senior rater is responsible for conducting a final review of the ratings to check for objectivity and fairness of officer ratings and completeness of performance evaluation reports. Army officials also stated that the Army Human Resources Command’s Evaluations Branch is responsible for the effective operation of the Army’s performance evaluation system. According to these officials, the Evaluations Branch receives every Army evaluation report for processing and final review for compliance with established policy and checks for violation or error, among other things. Army officials stated that these final review responsibilities for all evaluation reports helps ensure constant oversight and monitoring capabilities for the health of the Army’s performance evaluation system. These officials further stated that feedback is collected following selection board deliberations to assess system effectiveness. However, while Army officials described examples of efforts to us, they were unable to provide us with documentation to support how or when such reviews and evaluations occur or a plan for conducting such reviews in the future.</p>

Source: GAO analysis of Army documentation and information. | GAO-25-106618

Note: The military services employ a system of administrative classifications known as pay grades to standardize compensation. The “O” in O-1 stands for “officer,” while the “1” indicates the pay grade for that position. The other pay grade categories are “W” for warrant officers and “E” for enlisted personnel. In the Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force, officers in pay grades O-1 to O-3 are called company grade officers, O-4 to O-6 are called field grade officers, and O-7 and higher are called general officers. Naval officers are grouped similarly but are called junior grade, mid-grade, and flag officers.

^aArmy Regulation 623-3, *Evaluation Reporting System* (June 14, 2019).

^bDepartment of the Army Pamphlet 623-3, *Evaluation Reporting System* (Sept. 27, 2019).

^cArmy Regulation 25-30, *Army Publishing Program* (July 14, 2021).

^dSpecifically, Army guidance states that performance objectives should be (1) supportive of unit goals; (2) relevant to an important aspect of the duty position; (3) measurable and verifiable with qualitative or quantitative criteria; (4) results oriented; (5) specific; (6) clearly worded; and (7) set in a reasonable time. See Department of the Army Pamphlet 623-3.

^eDirector, Office of Personnel Management Memorandum, *Applying Rigor in the Performance Management Process and Leveraging Awards Programs for a High-Performing Workforce* (July 12, 2019).

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Table 4 summarizes our analysis of the extent to which the Navy’s performance evaluation system incorporated GAO’s key practices for performance evaluation.

Table 4: Analysis of the Navy’s Performance Evaluation System against GAO’s Key Practices for Performance Evaluation

GAO key practices for performance evaluation	Score and summary analysis
<p>(1) Establish and communicate a clear purpose for the performance evaluation system. Personnel should have a clear understanding of the intent of the system and why the organization is dedicating time and resources to the performance evaluation process.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Navy’s performance evaluation system policy—BUPERS Instruction 1610.10F—clearly communicates a purpose for the Navy’s performance evaluation system.^a The policy states that evaluations are the primary source of information for officer personnel management decisions and guide the member’s performance and development, enhance the accomplishment of the organization’s mission, and provide additional information to the chain of command.</p>
<p>(2) Allow for personnel to be directly involved in the performance evaluation process. A successful performance evaluation system allows for individuals to provide input to the evaluation process, such as by writing self-appraisals or working collaboratively with management to identify performance goals. Active personnel participation helps increase understanding and ownership of the system and belief in its fairness.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Navy requires sailors to prepare a self-assessment form that includes a discussion of growth, accomplishments, desired areas of improvement, and any required resources needed to complete the sailor’s tasks as part of the evaluation and feedback process. Additionally, the Navy views feedback on performance as a means of allowing the member to be involved in decision making and assisting in planning the actions required to implement the decisions to improve desired performance outcomes.</p>
<p>(3) Create and update guidance on procedures for the performance evaluation system. Instructions and protocols on the performance evaluation system’s processes, including personnel roles and responsibilities, should be documented, updated at appropriate intervals, and made accessible to ensure both raters and ratees know how the system functions.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Navy’s performance evaluation system policy outlines the system’s processes and procedures, including personnel roles and responsibilities. The policy was most recently updated in August 2022, and includes specific time frames for the instruction’s review and reissuance.</p>
<p>(4) Provide ongoing training on procedures for the performance evaluation system. Providing ongoing training on the performance evaluation system supports personnel’s understanding of and ability to operate the system in a manner consistent with organizational goals and objectives.</p>	<p>Partially incorporated. The Navy provides some online performance evaluation-related training on specific aspects of its system, but its performance evaluation system policy does not specify what training is required, when such training is required, and who is responsible for providing such training. Additionally, the Navy has not taken steps to provide ongoing training on its system to all officers to help ensure that all personnel understand and can operate the system in a manner consistent with organizational goals and objectives.</p> <p>For example, the Navy Personnel Command’s web page includes instructional videos on the online performance evaluation application, but these videos do not provide training on aspects of the system such as how to evaluate officer performance or how to write a self-assessment. Navy officials stated that individual officer communities may also conduct optional “brown bag” sessions to discuss aspects of the performance evaluation system, and that various leadership development courses and online tutorials offer lessons on the use of applicable software. However, according to Navy officials, the Navy does not have visibility into the extent of these other trainings provided on the performance evaluation system.</p>

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GAO key practices for performance evaluation	Score and summary analysis
<p>(5) Align individual performance expectations with organizational goals. An explicit alignment helps personnel see the connection between their daily activities and organizational goals.</p>	<p>Not incorporated. The Navy's performance evaluation system policy describes how a supervisor should connect a sailor's performance to Navy core values during performance counseling sessions, but it does not explicitly direct raters to align performance expectations with organizational goals. Navy officials stated that a module in the Navy's next generation performance evaluation and management system will align individual performance expectations with organizational goals through expectations-based evaluations. Officials believe this module will afford leaders throughout the Navy more influence over how officers are evaluated against critical Navy performance standards.</p>
<p>(6) Communicate performance expectations and competencies to all personnel. Clear, specific, and measurable expectations tied to specific competencies help drive important organizational goals and measure performance on factors that are directly linked to organizational success.</p>	<p>Partially incorporated. The Navy evaluates officers up to the rank of captain against seven traits, or competencies, using a five-point scoring system. According to a Navy official, the Navy's performance evaluation system policy should guide officers' understanding of the system's procedures and processes. However, while the policy provides detailed descriptions for all traits used to evaluate flag officers, it identifies and provides detailed descriptions for only two of the seven traits used to evaluate all other commissioned officers.</p> <p>Navy officials stated that due to concerns about the length of the policy, detailed descriptions were provided in the policy for the two traits that most often lead to adverse evaluations. Those two traits were (1) Command or Organizational Climate/Equal Opportunity and Character, and (2) Military Bearing and Character. One official further stated that raters and rated officers may refer to the performance evaluation report used during the performance evaluation cycle to identify the full list of traits on which officers are evaluated. However, the report provides only limited descriptions for the seven traits and describes what constitutes performance at three of the five rating levels; it does not provide full descriptions for the five traits not addressed by the policy. For example, the evaluation report identifies what performance levels should result in ratings of 1, 3, and 5, but does not provide descriptions for ratings of 2 or 4.</p> <p>Further, the Navy does not have a mechanism for capturing or acknowledging that expectations and competencies were communicated by raters to rated officers. Navy policy states that raters will perform counseling at the midpoint of the performance evaluation cycle and at the signing of the report. While the Navy's performance evaluation report contains signature blocks to document that midpoint and final counseling occurred, it does not include a mechanism, such as a signature block, for the officer to acknowledge the communication of clear, specific, and measurable expectations tied to specific competencies.</p>

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GAO key practices for performance evaluation	Score and summary analysis
<p>(7) Evaluate performance based on relevant competencies. Competencies define the skills and supporting behaviors that personnel need to effectively contribute to organizational results.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. Naval officers are evaluated against seven traits, or competencies. These traits include the following: professional expertise, command or organizational climate and equal opportunity, military bearing or character, teamwork, mission accomplishment and initiative, leadership, and tactical performance. Navy officials told us that the competencies are consistent with Navy core competencies that were identified as part of the Culture of Excellence 2.0 effort. The Navy’s Culture of Excellence 2.0 focuses on building great people, great leaders, and great teams.</p> <p>Navy officials also told us that proposed policy recommendations within the next generation performance evaluation and management system currently being prototyped outline eight key performance traits and values that are critical to the Navy. These key performance traits and values include character, leadership, initiative and drive, teamwork, communication, critical thinking, mission accomplishment and productivity, and resiliency and toughness. Navy officials stated that a study conducted by faculty from the Naval Postgraduate School in 2022 confirmed the validity of these prototyped competencies.</p>
<p>(8) Make meaningful distinctions in performance. Effective performance evaluation systems accurately assess personnel at different levels of performance based upon established expectations and competencies. They also provide the necessary objective information and documentation to reward top performers and deal with poor performers.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Navy has a mechanism to distinguish varying levels of performance among naval officers. Specifically, the Navy evaluates officers on seven traits based on a five-point scale of how well the officer met standards. The scale includes the following ratings: Below Standards (1.0), Progressing (2.0), Meets Standards (3.0), Above Standards (4.0), and Greatly Exceeds Standards (5.0). The Navy’s performance evaluation report provides example descriptors for performance at the 1.0, 3.0, and 5.0 ratings for each trait but does not specify what constitutes performance at the 2.0 or 4.0 rating levels. The Navy policy states that most sailors’ trait ratings should be in the 2.0 to 4.0 range, and that the 1.0 trait grade means generally poor performance that is not improving or unsatisfactory performance with respect to a single standard.</p> <p>In addition to the trait ratings, the performance evaluation report also includes a five-step promotion recommendation scale. Specifically, the scale includes the following: Significant Problems, Progressing, Promotable, Must Promote, and Early Promote. The Navy restricts the number of “Must Promote” and “Early Promote” selections a reporting senior can make that are tied to the average trait score an officer must achieve. Additionally, the Reporting Senior Cumulative Average tracks a cumulative average of all performance evaluations written by a reporting senior for a given grade. The average can fluctuate over the course of a rater’s career based on the number of evaluation reports written. Officials stated that the average provides an incentive to rate high performers higher than low performers.</p>

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GAO key practices for performance evaluation	Score and summary analysis
<p>(9) Conduct performance evaluations in a timely fashion. Management should consider the frequency of performance evaluations and conduct them over appropriate intervals. Additionally, performance evaluations should occur close in time to observed performance.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Navy’s performance evaluation system policy outlines specific intervals at which naval officers are evaluated, with performance evaluation reports due at the end of each grade’s respective month. For example, the evaluation reports for officers in grade O-1 are due on the last day of May each year. The policy also outlines exceptions to this schedule and other kinds of evaluation reports, such as concurrent reports for those fulfilling additional duties or reports for officers who may have recently received a formal evaluation. Further, the policy emphasizes the importance of timely report submission. Navy officials told us that the number of tardy performance evaluation report submissions is approximately 120 annually, which is less than .02 percent of submissions.</p>
<p>(10) Provide timely and actionable feedback on performance to personnel. Effective performance management systems strive to provide candid and constructive feedback with specific, actionable suggestions on performance at key points in the performance evaluation cycle, including after the completion of a performance evaluation. Personnel need to know in a timely manner how they are doing, including both strengths and areas to improve.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Navy’s performance evaluation system policy provides schedules, requirements, record keeping, and methods for conducting feedback—or performance counseling—sessions. The policy requires that performance counseling be performed at the midpoint of each evaluation cycle and at the time the evaluation report is signed. The performance evaluation report is used as the counseling worksheet, and it includes signature blocks for the rated officer to acknowledge that they received midpoint counseling and discussed performance at the end of the evaluation cycle.</p>
<p>(11) Regularly evaluate the performance evaluation system and update as needed. Routinely evaluating performance evaluation processes and tools and making necessary changes helps ensure the effectiveness, accuracy, and quality of the system. The results of the performance evaluation system should also be regularly evaluated for bias and accuracy.</p>	<p>Partially incorporated. The Navy has made some incremental changes to its performance evaluation system. For example, in 2022, the Navy began implementing an electronic system for filing performance evaluation reports. Additionally, two recent studies conducted by the Naval Postgraduate School reviewed aspects of the system. Specifically, one of the studies identified perceptions of the Navy’s system and compared it to the other services’ systems, while the other validated future performance traits the Navy has developed as part a new performance evaluation system prototype. Navy policy also states that commands should establish quality review processes to check performance evaluations for completeness. However, the Navy has not regularly evaluated the system’s processes and tools to help ensure the effectiveness, accuracy, and quality of the system. Further, it does not have a process for conducting reviews of ratings or ratings trends to ensure fairness or accuracy of individual ratings.</p>

Source: GAO analysis of Navy documentation and information. | GAO-25-106618

Note: The military services employ a system of administrative classifications known as pay grades to standardize compensation. The “O” in O-1 stands for “officer,” while the “1” indicates the pay grade for that position. The other pay grade categories are “W” for warrant officers and “E” for enlisted personnel. In the Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force officers in pay grades O-1 to O-3 are called company grade officers, O-4 to O-6 are called field grade officers, and O-7 and higher are called general officers. Naval officers are grouped similarly but are called junior grade, mid-grade, and flag officers.

³U.S. Navy, BUPERS Instruction 1610.10F Change Transmittal 1, *Navy Performance Evaluation System* (Aug. 18, 2022).

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Table 5 summarizes our analysis of the extent to which the Marine Corps’ performance evaluation system incorporated GAO’s key practices for performance evaluation.

Table 5: Analysis of the Marine Corps’ Performance Evaluation System against GAO’s Key Practices for Performance Evaluation

GAO key practices for performance evaluation	Score and summary analysis
<p>(1) Establish and communicate a clear purpose for the performance evaluation system. Personnel should have a clear understanding of the intent of the system and why the organization is dedicating time and resources to the performance evaluation process.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Marine Corps’ performance evaluation system policy—Marine Corps Order 1610.7B—clearly communicates two functions of its performance evaluation system.^a First, the Marine Corps’ performance evaluation system supports the centralized selection, promotion, and retention of the most qualified marines. Second, the system aids in the assignment of personnel and supports other personnel management decisions as required. Moreover, the policy states that the performance evaluation report provides the primary means for evaluating a marine’s performance to support the Commandant of the Marine Corps’ efforts to select the best qualified personnel for promotion, career designation, retention, resident schooling, and command and duty assignments. This purpose is also clearly stated on the performance evaluation report.</p>
<p>(2) Allow for personnel to be directly involved in the performance evaluation process. A successful performance evaluation system allows for individuals to provide input to the evaluation process, such as by writing self-appraisals or working collaboratively with management to identify performance goals. Active personnel participation helps increase understanding and ownership of the system and belief in its fairness.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Marine Corps allows rated officers to be directly involved in the performance evaluation process. For example, the Marine Corps’ performance evaluation system policy requires marines to submit a summary of accomplishments to their reporting senior—the marines’ immediate supervisor—using the Marine Reported-On Worksheet prior to the end of the reporting period. The policy further states that the marine being evaluated must possess a clear understanding of the concepts of the performance evaluation system, the marine’s own role in accomplishing the unit’s mission, and the expectations of the reporting senior.</p>
<p>(3) Create and update guidance on procedures for the performance evaluation system. Instructions and protocols on the performance evaluation system’s processes, including personnel roles and responsibilities, should be documented, updated at appropriate intervals, and made accessible to ensure both raters and ratees know how the system functions.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Marine Corps’ performance evaluation system policy—Marine Corps Order 1610.7B—outlines the service’s procedures and processes for its system. Marine Corps officials stated that Headquarters Marine Corps’ Performance Evaluation Section regularly updates the Marine Corps’ policy for the performance evaluation system based on service-level policy changes that substantively affect the content of the policy. Officials told us that the Marine Corps’ goal is to issue a revised policy every 3 to 5 years and as other service and Department of the Navy requirements necessitate. They also stated that interim policy updates are released via Marine Corps Administrative Messages.</p>

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GAO key practices for performance evaluation	Score and summary analysis
<p>(4) Provide ongoing training on procedures for the performance evaluation system. Providing ongoing training on the performance evaluation system supports personnel’s understanding of and ability to operate the system in a manner consistent with organizational goals and objectives.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Marine Corps provides ongoing training to its officers on its performance evaluation system. Specifically, the Marine Corps’ performance evaluation system policy states that the key to preserving and improving the quality of performance evaluations is knowledge and understanding of the performance evaluation system policy and Marine Corps values. The policy requires that all officer professional military education courses taught through the Marine Corps Training and Education Command contain instruction devoted to the performance evaluation system. Additionally, the policy states that commanders shall (1) ensure that all marines and reporting seniors are knowledgeable of applicable provisions of the performance evaluation system, and (2) conduct appropriate training annually. The policy states that the Performance Evaluation Policy and Compliance Section is responsible for supervising the performance evaluation system’s education program.</p> <p>Marine Corps officials stated that the annual training is subject to inspection by the Marine Corps Inspector General, which is conducted using a checklist of required training elements. Officials further stated that the Performance Evaluation Section provides training slides that commanders can use as a foundation to brief their subordinates.</p>
<p>(5) Align individual performance expectations with organizational goals. An explicit alignment helps personnel see the connection between their daily activities and organizational goals.</p>	<p>Not incorporated. The Marine Corps’ performance evaluation system policy states that reporting seniors must evaluate officers against missions, duties, tasks, and standards as communicated to the officer being evaluated. Specifically, according to that policy, the description of a marine’s occupation or primary duties—or the billet description—should highlight significant responsibilities as they relate to the accomplishment of his or her unit’s or organization’s mission during the reporting period. The performance evaluation system policy further requires that officers be evaluated against known Marine Corps values and soldierly virtues.</p> <p>However, the policy does not require the alignment of individual performance expectations with organizational goals. A Marine Corps official stated that every unit is assigned a mission, and the unit’s goals will be tied to that mission. The official provided an example of a unit’s organization and equipment report, which identifies the unit’s assigned mission and how tasks should tie into that mission. This official further stated that if an officer understands his or her billet description and how that billet description relates to the mission of the unit, the officer’s daily activities and expectations are effectively aligned with a unit’s goals. However, the example of the unit organization and equipment report provided to us focused specifically on the unit’s mission and, therefore, does not clearly reflect an alignment between mission and goals.</p>

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<p>(6) Communicate performance expectations and competencies to all personnel. Clear, specific, and measurable expectations tied to specific competencies help drive important organizational goals and measure performance on factors that are directly linked to organizational success.</p>	<p>Partially incorporated. The Marine Corps’ performance evaluation system policy and performance evaluation report clearly identify and define the competencies by which officers are evaluated and set the standards for specific performance ratings for each competency. The Marine Corps’ policy also outlines a process for developing officer billet descriptions. This process serves to communicate performance expectations and competencies to officers, according to Marine Corps officials. The policy states that within the first 30 days of a reporting relationship, the rater and rated officer should meet to discuss and establish the rated officer’s billet description and document it on the performance evaluation report.</p> <p>However, the Marine Corps’ performance evaluation report does not include a mechanism—such as a signature block—for the officer to acknowledge this step. A Marine Corps official confirmed that there is no such mechanism on the form and there is nothing in current practice to ensure this process is occurring as intended. The official stated that this was a gap in the Marine Corps’ current approach and that the Marine Corps is exploring options to achieve greater assurance that the policy is being followed, such as by notifying both the rater and the rated officer when the 30-day window for the initial counseling session begins.</p>
<p>(7) Evaluate performance based on relevant competencies. Competencies define the skills and supporting behaviors that personnel need to effectively contribute to organizational results.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Marine Corps evaluates marines based on five categories comprised of 14 attributes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mission Accomplishment, which includes performance and proficiency; • Individual Character, which includes courage, effectiveness under stress, and initiative; • Leadership, which includes leading subordinates, developing subordinates, setting the example, ensuring the well-being of subordinates, and communication skills; • Intellect and Wisdom, which includes professional military education, decision making ability, and judgement; and • Fulfilment of Evaluation Responsibilities, which includes an attribute for evaluating subordinates. <p>The Marine Corps’ policy for the performance evaluation system states that these attributes collectively provide a clear picture of a marine’s demonstrated capacities, abilities, and character.</p>

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GAO key practices for performance evaluation	Score and summary analysis
<p>(8) Make meaningful distinctions in performance. Effective performance evaluation systems accurately assess personnel at different levels of performance based upon established expectations and competencies. They also provide the necessary objective information and documentation to reward top performers and deal with poor performers.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Marine Corps’ performance evaluation system allows rating officials to make meaningful distinctions in performance among marines. The Marine Corps uses an eight-letter rating scale, letters A through H, for each of the 14 attributes described in the previous key practice. There are options for adverse material (letter A) and not observed behavior (letter H). Both the Marine Corps performance evaluation system policy and performance evaluation report form provide Performance-Anchored Rating Scales that provide descriptors for certain letters, which then allow a reporting senior to rate that marine higher or lower based on the description.</p> <p>The letter rankings for each of the 14 attributes are then converted to numerical values that are averaged to form the Fitness Report Average. This number is considered in the cumulative relative value which reflects the cumulative relative value of a marine’s performance evaluation report based on the reporting senior’s rating history for marines of the same grade as that marine.</p> <p>After the reporting senior’s evaluation, the reviewing officer completes a comparative assessment, whereby the marine being evaluated is compared against other marines of the same grade. The reviewing officer places the marine on a graphical representation of scores whereby fewer marines receive the highest rankings. The reviewing officer can choose one of eight options, ranging from “The Eminently Qualified Marine” to “Unsatisfactory.”</p>
<p>(9) Conduct performance evaluations in a timely fashion. Management should consider the frequency of performance evaluations and conduct them over appropriate intervals. Additionally, performance evaluations should occur close in time to observed performance.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Marine Corps’ policy for the performance evaluation system states that all performance evaluation reports are expected to arrive at Headquarters Marine Corps no later than 30 days after the reporting period ends to ensure proper processing into official records and to facilitate selection board and personnel management decisions. Per service policy, marines are evaluated at least once annually, and evaluations are required to focus on observed individual performance during the designated period. Additionally, some officers are evaluated based on their timely submission of ratings. Specifically, the Marine Corps’ final attribute evaluates whether a reporting official conducted, or required others to conduct, accurate, uninflated, and timely evaluations, which helps ensure raters are conducting their performance evaluation responsibilities in a timely manner.</p>

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GAO key practices for performance evaluation	Score and summary analysis
<p>(10) Provide timely and actionable feedback on performance to personnel. Effective performance management systems strive to provide candid and constructive feedback with specific, actionable suggestions on performance at key points in the performance evaluation cycle, including after the completion of a performance evaluation. Personnel need to know in a timely manner how they are doing, including both strengths and areas to improve.</p>	<p>Partially incorporated. The Marine Corps partially incorporated this practice because although its policies and guidance provide for the provision of some feedback, it does not have clear requirements for performance feedback following a performance evaluation or a mechanism, such as a signature block on the evaluation report, to ensure that feedback is delivered at all key points in the performance evaluation cycle.</p> <p>Specifically, the process for providing performance feedback in the Marine Corps is defined within three policy and guidance documents—its counseling guidance, performance evaluation system policy, and leadership development policy.^b The counseling guidance—which officials told us governs the counseling program for the Marine Corps independent of the performance evaluation system policy—states that officers will receive an initial counseling session within 30 days of establishing a rater-ratee relationship and follow-on sessions at intervals of no more than 6 months. However, neither this counseling guidance nor the aforementioned policy documents establish clear requirements for the provision of feedback with specific, actionable suggestions on performance to officers after the completion of a performance evaluation. The Marine Corps performance evaluation system policy specifically states that counseling is separate and complementary to performance evaluation.</p> <p>Additionally, while the Marine Corps’ counseling guidance sets the time frames for initial and follow-on counseling, it does not require documentation of those counseling sessions and leaves specific procedures up to the individual unit commanders. This guidance provides worksheet templates and recommended elements for the documentation of counseling. But neither the guidance nor associated documentation include a mechanism—such as a signature block—for the officer being evaluated to acknowledge the completion of counseling during the performance evaluation cycle or following the completion of a performance evaluation report.</p>
<p>(11) Regularly evaluate the performance evaluation system and update as needed. Routinely evaluating performance evaluation processes and tools and making necessary changes helps ensure the effectiveness, accuracy, and quality of the system. The results of the performance evaluation system should also be regularly evaluated for bias and accuracy.</p>	<p>Partially incorporated. According to Marine Corps officials, the last major evaluation or study of the performance evaluation system was conducted in 1996, just prior to the service adopting its current system. However, the Marine Corps has since made updates to its system through revisions and changes to the performance evaluation system policy, with the most recent reissuance of the policy occurring in June 2023. The Marine Corps also has processes for inspecting performance evaluation reports and reviewing rating trends, which, according to officials, includes reviews at the headquarters level for accuracy and completeness. However, these efforts do not include regular evaluation of the system’s processes and tools to help ensure its effectiveness, accuracy, and quality.</p>

Source: GAO analysis of Marine Corps documentation and information. | GAO-25-106618

Note: The military services employ a system of administrative classifications known as pay grades to standardize compensation. The “O” in O-1 stands for “officer,” while the “1” indicates the pay grade for that position. The other pay grade categories are “W” for warrant officers and “E” for enlisted

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personnel. In the Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force officers in pay grades O-1 to O-3 are called company grade officers, O-4 to O-6 are called field grade officers, and O-7 and higher are called general officers. Naval officers are grouped similarly but are called junior grade, mid-grade, and flag officers.

^aMarine Corps Order 1610.7B, *Performance Evaluation System (PES)* (June 5, 2023).

^bMarine Corps Order 1610.7B; Marine Corps Order 1500.61, *Marine Leader Development* (July 28, 2017); Department of the Navy, NAVMC 2795, *USMC User's Guide to Counseling* (July 21, 1986).

Table 6 summarizes our analysis of the extent to which the Air Force's performance evaluation system incorporated GAO's key practices for performance evaluation.

Table 6: Analysis of the Air Force's Performance Evaluation System against GAO's Key Practices for Performance Evaluation

GAO key practices for performance evaluation	Score and summary analysis
<p>(1) Establish and communicate a clear purpose for the performance evaluation system. Personnel should have a clear understanding of the intent of the system and why the organization is dedicating time and resources to the performance evaluation process.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Air Force's performance evaluation system policy—Air Force Instruction 36-2406—clearly identifies the purpose for its performance evaluation system, which includes three specific elements.^a The first is to effectively communicate performance standards and expectations and provide meaningful feedback on how those standards and expectations are being upheld. The second is to establish a reliable, long-term, cumulative record of performance and promotion potential based on that performance. The third is to provide sound information to assist in making talent management decisions.</p>
<p>(2) Allow for personnel to be directly involved in the performance evaluation process. A successful performance evaluation system allows for individuals to provide input to the evaluation process, such as by writing self-appraisals or working collaboratively with management to identify performance goals. Active personnel participation helps increase understanding and ownership of the system and belief in its fairness.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Air Force's performance evaluation system policy allows for the rated officer to provide the rater with inputs on specific accomplishments but forbids the rated officer from writing or drafting any portion of their own performance evaluation report. In addition, the Air Force's Writing Guide for Using Airman Leadership Qualities states that raters should co-create a personalized development plan with rated officers prior to performance evaluation.^b</p>
<p>(3) Create and update guidance on procedures for the performance evaluation system. Instructions and protocols on the performance evaluation system's processes, including personnel roles and responsibilities, should be documented, updated at appropriate intervals, and made accessible to ensure both raters and ratees know how the system functions.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Air Force has created policy and guidance on procedures for its performance evaluation system and has updated them at routine intervals. Specifically, its policy was most recently updated in January 2024. Air Force publishing policy, Department of the Air Force Manual 90-161, requires that all policies and guidance be updated at least every 4 years.^c In addition, the Air Force's Writing Guide for Using Airman Leadership Qualities provides information on the Air Force's new performance evaluation system, including what the new evaluation system entails and guidance on how to write narrative-style performance statements.</p>

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GAO key practices for performance evaluation	Score and summary analysis
<p>(4) Provide ongoing training on procedures for the performance evaluation system. Providing ongoing training on the performance evaluation system supports personnel's understanding of and ability to operate the system in a manner consistent with organizational goals and objectives.</p>	<p>Partially incorporated. The Air Force provides training on aspects of its performance evaluation system, such as a step-by-step guide for completing an electronic performance evaluation that is available to users within the service's online evaluation system. Air Force performance evaluation system policy states that commanders will ensure supervisors are properly trained and educated on how to write a performance evaluation.</p> <p>However, this policy does not specify what training on the performance evaluation system is required for officers and when such training is required. Moreover, the Air Force has not taken steps to provide such ongoing training to all officers. Air Force officials told us that Air Force Personnel Command conducts training for personnel service and support staff, who then train commanders and users, but officials could not say with certainty whether all officers receive training on the performance evaluation system and at what intervals. Additionally, Air Force officials did not provide us with materials related to ongoing training on the performance evaluation system.</p>
<p>(5) Align individual performance expectations with organizational goals. An explicit alignment helps personnel see the connection between their daily activities and organizational goals.</p>	<p>Not incorporated. Air Force performance evaluation system documentation highlights the importance of the Air Force's Core Values, but its performance evaluation system policy does not require that raters align rated officers' individual expectations with organizational goals. Air Force officials told us that individual performance expectations are aligned to four major performance areas, which are divided into 10 Airman Leadership Qualities, and are considered metrics for mission achievement. These major performance areas include (1) executing the mission, (2) leading people, (3) managing resources, and (4) improving the unit. The officials stated that the major performance areas are organizational goals that commanders and units are expected to achieve and what they are evaluated against. However, documentation provided by Air Force officials aligned these major performance areas and the associated Airman Leadership Qualities with the Air Force's Core Values. The documentation also did not clearly state that an explicit alignment of performance expectations with Air Force organizational goals should occur. As discussed, goals and values differ in that an organization's goals are end results expected to be achieved within a specified period, while its values are the moral code of the organization.</p>
<p>(6) Communicate performance expectations and competencies to all personnel. Clear, specific, and measurable expectations tied to specific competencies help drive important organizational goals and measure performance on factors that are directly linked to organizational success.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Air Force's performance evaluation system policy states that raters are to understand, demonstrate, and communicate Air Force standards and expectations when providing feedback to personnel. According to Air Force policy, the final feedback session of one reporting period should also establish expectations for the new reporting period. In addition, Air Force Form 724—the Airman Comprehensive Assessment Worksheet—includes both a place to list expectations for the rated officer as well as a signature block for the rated officer to acknowledge that expectations were established and communicated during the feedback session.</p>

Appendix V: Analysis of the Military Services' Officer Performance Evaluation Systems against GAO's Key Practices for Performance Evaluation

GAO key practices for performance evaluation	Score and summary analysis
<p>(7) Evaluate performance based on relevant competencies. Competencies define the skills and supporting behaviors that personnel need to effectively contribute to organizational results.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Air Force's performance evaluation system policy states that raters will measure performance using a whole-person concept relative to the rated officer's specific grade, level of responsibility, and assigned duties throughout the entire rating period based on the Airman Leadership Qualities. These 10 qualities are grouped into four major performance areas which, according to the Air Force, are indicative of potential for greater responsibility:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executing the Mission, which includes job proficiency, adaptability, and initiative; • Leading People, which includes inclusion and teamwork, emotional intelligence, communication; • Managing Resources, which includes stewardship and accountability; and • Improving the Unit, which includes decision making and innovation.
<p>(8) Make meaningful distinctions in performance. Effective performance evaluation systems accurately assess personnel at different levels of performance based upon established expectations and competencies. They also provide the necessary objective information and documentation to reward top performers and deal with poor performers.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Air Force's performance evaluation report requires raters to write narratives for each of the four major performance areas and include select Airman Leadership Qualities. According to Air Force officials, these narratives are written in accordance with individual proficiency-level ratings; however, officers do not receive a specific proficiency rating on their performance evaluation report. Officials stated that the proficiency level ratings were removed from the evaluation report during the Air Force's transition to its new performance evaluation system. The officials further stated that the proficiency levels are used for feedback purposes between the rater and rated officer, but not for talent management decisions.</p> <p>The Air Force's policy for the performance evaluation system also requires raters to differentiate between rated officers with similar performance records, especially when making promotion, stratification, assignment, developmental education, and retention recommendations. Stratifications serve to provide clear feedback to rated officers on their overall performance in relation to a relevant peer group with similar knowledge, skills, experience, and scope of work and responsibility, and to document that performance assessment for future unit-level and enterprise-level talent management decisions.</p>
<p>(9) Conduct performance evaluations in a timely fashion. Management should consider the frequency of performance evaluations and conduct them over appropriate intervals. Additionally, performance evaluations should occur close in time to observed performance.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Air Force uses static closeout dates for all performance evaluation reports for officers of the same grade. For example, the performance evaluation reports for officers in grades O-1 and O-2 are due on October 31 of each year. The Air Force's performance evaluation system policy states that the required minimum number of days of supervision ranges from 60 to 120 calendar days for each grade until the first static closeout date for that grade is reached. Officials also told us that the Air Force makes exceptions to the static closeout date requirement and that officers can receive an additional report directed by a commander or headquarters to limit any potential adverse impacts related to the static closeout date.</p>

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GAO key practices for performance evaluation	Score and summary analysis
<p>(10) Provide timely and actionable feedback on performance to personnel. Effective performance management systems strive to provide candid and constructive feedback with specific, actionable suggestions on performance at key points in the performance evaluation cycle, including after the completion of a performance evaluation. Personnel need to know in a timely manner how they are doing, including both strengths and areas to improve.</p>	<p>Fully incorporated. The Air Force's performance evaluation system policy requires that initial, midterm, and final feedback be provided to rated officers. Raters are required to provide an initial feedback session to a rated officer within the first 60 calendar days of initiating supervision. Midterm feedback is required halfway between the date supervision begins and the annual static closeout date. Air Force officials told us that rated officers may also request feedback if they desire it, and raters are able to provide feedback as they deem appropriate. The Airman Comprehensive Assessment Worksheet is used to document feedback and includes a signature block for the rater and the rated officer to each acknowledge that final feedback was provided.</p> <p>Air Force officials told us that they are also in the process of developing a mobile-to-mobile system that can make all forms of feedback timelier and more reliable. This system is pending approval, and officials stated that they expect it to launch sometime in 2024.</p>

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GAO key practices for performance evaluation	Score and summary analysis
<p>(11) Regularly evaluate the performance evaluation system and update as needed. Routinely evaluating performance evaluation processes and tools and making necessary changes helps ensure the effectiveness, accuracy, and quality of the system. The results of the performance evaluation system should also be regularly evaluated for bias and accuracy.</p>	<p>Partially incorporated. According to Air Force officials, the Air Force makes incremental changes—such as policy updates—to the performance evaluation system as needed and has a process for ensuring completeness of performance evaluation reports. However, it has not regularly evaluated the system’s processes and tools to help ensure the effectiveness, accuracy, and quality of the system, and it does not review ratings or related trends to ensure fairness or accuracy of individual ratings.</p> <p>The Air Force’s performance evaluation system policy requires that the Directorate of Military Force Management Policy establish an annual evaluation systems’ program review to determine if improvements or changes are needed. An Air Force official told us that such a formal annual review has not been required due to the frequency of updates made to the performance evaluation system policy, with some as recent as 2023 and 2024. However, the policy-specific updates officials described were not based on evaluations of the system’s processes or tools. For example, officials stated that the most recent policy update revised the Department of the Air Force policy to only be applicable to the Air Force following the issuance of the Space Force’s policy. Additionally, the Air Force’s performance evaluation system policy states that major commands may conduct an optional quality review of ratings and return any for correction, as necessary.^d However, the policy does not prescribe the scope of these reviews, and their optional nature does not ensure that the results of the performance evaluation system are reviewed on a regular or routine basis.</p> <p>Air Force officials also told us that the Air Force has contracted with the RAND Corporation to develop an evaluation plan to study the impact of changes made to the Air Force’s performance evaluation system, which will include surveying approximately 55,000 airmen to gather feedback on their experiences with the performance evaluation system. However, officials did not state how these perspectives would inform an evaluation of the performance evaluation system. Moreover, while the Air Force has this effort underway, it does not have a plan to evaluate its performance evaluation system moving forward.</p>

Source: GAO analysis of Air Force documentation and information. | GAO-25-106618

Note: The military services employ a system of administrative classifications known as pay grades to standardize compensation. The “O” in O-1 stands for “officer.” while the “1” indicates the pay grade for that position. The other pay grade categories are “W” for warrant officers and “E” for enlisted personnel. In the Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force officers in pay grades O-1 to O-3 are called company grade officers, O-4 to O-6 are called field grade officers, and O-7 and higher are called general officers. Naval officers are grouped similarly but are called junior grade, mid-grade, and flag officers.

^aAir Force Instruction 36-2406, *Officer and Enlisted Evaluations Systems* (Aug. 4, 2023) (incorporating Air Force Guidance Memorandum 2024-01, Jan. 17, 2024). The Air Force reissued its policy on performance evaluations on August 6, 2024, during the final stages of our review. As a result, we were unable to analyze this new policy using the methodological approach we employed during the course of our review. Therefore, the report does not account for new changes to the policy that might otherwise affect the information presented here. However, an Air Force official told us that the revisions largely incorporate changes previously outlined in the January 2024 guidance memorandum, which was included in our analysis.

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^bDepartment of the Air Force, *Air Force Writing Guide for Using Airman Leadership Qualities*, version 1 (Jan. 10, 2023).

^cDepartment of the Air Force Manual 90-161, *Publishing Processes and Procedures* (Oct. 18, 2023).

^dAn Air Force Major Command is a major subdivision of the Air Force that is assigned a major part of the Air Force mission and is directly subordinate to Headquarters Air Force.

Appendix VI: GAO Interview Responses from Statutory Promotion Board Members

To inform our understanding of how officer performance evaluations inform the determinations of statutory promotion boards, we interviewed 19 officers who previously served on a statutory promotion selection since January 1, 2020.¹ Responses to selected interview questions are shown in tables 7 through 15 on topics related to the types and timing of information provided to promotion selection board members; promotion selection board processes; use of certain types of information by the promotion board members; and overall perceptions of the fairness and transparency of the promotion and performance evaluation processes.

Because our interviews were conducted with a nongeneralizable sample of officers, the responses provided below are only representative of the promotion board members we interviewed and cannot be generalized to all current or former promotion board members across the military services. For a more detailed discussion of our structured interview methodology, see appendix III. In addition, for the complete interview questionnaire used for our interviews with statutory promotion selection board members, see appendix I.

Tables 7 and 8 show promotion board member responses to whether or not the information they received on officers and the time available to consider that information was enough.

Table 7: Do you feel you did or did not receive enough information to inform your decisions of whether or not to recommend officers for promotion? (Question 13)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Enough information (yes)	3	5	4	3	4	19
Not enough information (no)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don't know	0	0	0	0	0	0
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	3	5	4	3	4	19

Source: GAO interviews with former statutory promotion board members. | GAO-25-106618

¹The 19 statutory promotion board members we interviewed included the following: Army, three; Navy, five; Marine Corps, four; Air Force, three; and Space Force, four (see table 7). See appendix III for additional demographic information on our interview participants.

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Table 8: Do you feel you did or did not have enough time to consider information on each officer when deciding whether to recommend an officer for promotion or not? (Question 15)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Had enough time (yes)	3	5	4	2	3	17
Did not have enough time (no)	0	0	0	1	1	2
Don't know	0	0	0	0	0	0
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	3	5	4	3	4	19

Source: GAO interviews with former statutory promotion board members. | GAO-25-106618

Table 9 shows the types of information promotion board members felt were most useful when deciding to recommend an officer for promotion. All 19 promotion board members responded that either all or part of the officers' performance evaluation reports were most useful when considering an officer for promotion. Some promotion board members felt more than one type of information was most useful, including (1) education transcripts, (2) disciplinary records, (3) letters from the officer or on behalf of the officer, and (4) summary documents of the officer's records prepared specifically for the board.

Table 9: What information was the most useful to you when deciding whether to recommend an officer for promotion or not? (Question 14)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
All or part of officer performance evaluation reports	3	5	4	3	4	19
Education transcripts	0	0	0	0	1	1
Disciplinary record	0	0	0	1	1	2
Letter from the officer or others on officer's behalf	0	0	0	0	1	1
Oral instructions provided to the board	0	0	0	0	0	0
Precept language from DOD or military department/service	0	0	0	0	0	0
Service promotion board policy documents	0	0	0	0	0	0
None	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	0	0	1	2	1	4

Source: GAO interviews with former statutory promotion board members. | GAO-25-106618

Note: Interviewees could respond with more than one type of information source.

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Table 10 shows promotion board member responses when asked about the usefulness of the information contained in officer performance evaluation reports.

Table 10: Did you feel the information contained in officer performance evaluation reports was very useful, useful, somewhat useful, slightly useful, or not useful at all? (Question 18)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Very useful	1	4	2	2	2	11
Useful	2	1	2	0	2	7
Somewhat useful	0	0	0	1	0	1
Slightly useful	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not useful at all	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don't know	0	0	0	0	0	0
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	3	5	4	3	4	19

Source: GAO interviews with former statutory promotion board members. | GAO-25-106618

Almost all the promotion board members we spoke with felt the officer performance evaluation reports they reviewed provided enough detail to inform decisions about whether to recommend an officer for promotion (see table 11). One promotion board member did not feel that the evaluation reports provided enough detail, stating that the limited space of the narrative section is not sufficient to capture performance for an entire year.

Table 11: Did you feel that the officer performance evaluation reports you reviewed did or did not provide enough detail to inform your decision whether to recommend an officer for promotion? (Question 20)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Did provide enough detail (yes)	3	4	3	3	4	17
Did not provide enough detail (no)	0	1	0	0	0	1
Don't know	0	0	0	0	0	0
Prefer not to answer	0	0	1	0	0	1
Total	3	5	4	3	4	19

Source: GAO interviews with former statutory promotion board members. | GAO-25-106618

The responses summarized in tables 12 and 13 relate to the use of specific words or phrases in the narrative section of the performance evaluation report.

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Table 12: To your knowledge, are there specific words or phrases raters include in the narrative section of a performance evaluation report to influence a promotion selection board’s decision of whether to recommend an officer for promotion? (Question 22)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Yes	3	5	4	2	2	16
No	0	0	0	1	2	3
Don’t know	0	0	0	0	0	0
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	3	5	4	3	4	19

Source: GAO interviews with former statutory promotion board members. | GAO-25-106618

Table 13: Considering your experience serving on a promotion selection board, did use of those words or phrases influence the promotion selection board’s decision about whether to recommend an officer for promotion? (Question 22d)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Yes	1	5	4	2	2	14
No	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don’t know	2	0	0	0	0	2
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	3	5	4	2	2	16

Source: GAO interviews with former statutory promotion board members. | GAO-25-106618

Note: The total number of respondents is based on the number of officers that responded “yes” to question 22, indicating that they had knowledge of specific words or phrases raters include in the narrative section of a performance evaluation.

Tables 14 and 15 show promotion board member responses to questions about the overall fairness of their services’ promotion board process and the extent to which those processes recommend the right officers for promotion. All 19 promotion board members responded that their services’ promotion board processes are either fair or very fair, with 13 responding that they felt the processes were very fair overall (see table 14). The responses to our question about whether the services’ promotion board processes selected the right individuals for promotion were slightly more mixed. Of the 19 promotion board members we interviewed, 10 members felt the processes selected the right officers for promotion were “well,” while five responded “very well,” and four responded “somewhat well” (see table 15).

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Table 14: How fair or unfair do you feel your service’s officer promotion board processes are overall? Would you say your service’s officer promotion board processes are very fair, fair, somewhat fair, slightly fair, or not at all fair? (Question 24)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Very Fair	1	5	1	2	4	13
Fair	2	0	3	1	0	6
Somewhat fair	0	0	0	0	0	0
Slightly fair	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not at all fair	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don’t know	0	0	0	0	0	0
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	3	5	4	3	4	19

Source: GAO interviews with former statutory promotion board members. | GAO-25-106618

Table 15: Would you say your service’s promotion selection board processes identify the right officers to be recommended for recommended for promotion very well, well, somewhat well, slightly well, or not at all well? (Question 25)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Very well	1	1	2	1	0	5
Well	2	2	1	1	4	10
Somewhat well	0	2	1	1	0	4
Slightly well	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not at all well	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don’t know	0	0	0	0	0	0
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	3	5	4	3	4	19

Source: GAO interviews with former statutory promotion board members. | GAO-25-106618

Appendix VII: GAO Interview Responses from Active Duty Commissioned Officers

To inform our understanding of how officer performance evaluation reports inform officer development, we interviewed 31 officers who had been commissioned prior to January 1, 2022, and had received at least one performance evaluation as an active duty officer.¹ Responses to selected interview questions are shown in tables 16 through 26 and include topics such as whether performance feedback was provided by a rater; the value, clarity, and timeliness of feedback the officer received; and whether such feedback was actionable.

Because our interviews were conducted with a nongeneralizable sample of officers, the responses provided below are only representative of the active duty officers we interviewed and cannot be generalized to all officers across the Department of Defense. For a more detailed discussion of our structured interview methodology, see appendix III. In addition, for the complete interview questionnaire used for our interviews with active duty commissioned officers, see appendix II.

Table 16 shows officers' responses to whether job performance feedback was provided by their rater with their most recent performance evaluation report.

Table 16: When you received your most recent performance evaluation report, did you also receive job performance feedback from your rater? (Question 14)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Yes	3	7	4	1	1	16
No	3	2	2	4	4	15
Total	6	9	6	5	5	31

Source: GAO interviews with active duty commissioned officers. | GAO-25-106618

Tables 17 through 20 show officers' responses to questions about the performance feedback that accompanied their most recent performance evaluation report. These questions were asked only of those officers who received performance feedback with their most recent performance evaluation report. Therefore, 16 officers were asked and provided a response to these questions. While officer responses to questions about the timeliness and clarity of their performance evaluation reports were mostly positive (see tables 17 and 18), responses to questions about

¹The 31 officers we interviewed included the following: Army, six; Navy, nine; Marine Corps, six; Air Force, five; and Space Force, five (see table 16). See appendix III for additional demographic information on our interview participants.

whether the feedback was actionable and valuable were slightly more mixed across all response categories (see tables 19 and 20).

Table 17: Would you say the feedback you received accompanying your most recent performance evaluation report was very timely, timely, somewhat timely, slightly timely, or not at all timely? (Question 15)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Very timely	2	4	3	1	0	10
Timely	0	3	1	0	0	4
Somewhat timely	1	0	0	0	1	2
Slightly timely	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not timely	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don't know	0	0	0	0	0	0
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	3	7	4	1	1	16

Source: GAO interviews with active duty commissioned officers. | GAO-25-106618

Note: The total number of respondents is based on the number of officers that responded "yes" to question 14, indicating that they received performance feedback with their most recent performance evaluation report.

Table 18: Would you say the feedback you received accompanying your most recent performance evaluation report was very clear, clear, somewhat clear, slightly clear, or not at all clear? (Question 16)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Very clear	3	3	3	0	1	10
Clear	0	3	1	1	0	5
Somewhat clear	0	0	0	0	0	0
Slightly clear	0	1	0	0	0	1
Not clear	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don't know	0	0	0	0	0	0
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	3	7	4	1	1	16

Source: GAO interviews with active duty commissioned officers. | GAO-25-106618

Note: The total number of respondents is based on the number of officers that responded "yes" to question 14, indicating that they received performance feedback with their most recent performance evaluation report.

Table 19: Would you say the feedback you received accompanying your most recent performance evaluation report was very actionable, actionable, somewhat actionable, slightly actionable, or not at all actionable? (Question 17)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Very actionable	1	2	2	0	0	5
Actionable	0	1	0	1	0	2
Somewhat actionable	2	2	1	0	0	5
Slightly actionable	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not actionable	0	1	1	0	1	3
Don't know	0	1	0	0	0	1
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	3	7	4	1	1	16

Source: GAO interviews with active duty commissioned officers. | GAO-25-106618

Note: The total number of respondents is based on the number of officers that responded "yes" to question 14, indicating that they received performance feedback with their most recent performance evaluation report.

Table 20: Would you say the feedback you received accompanying your most recent performance evaluation report was very valuable, valuable, somewhat valuable, slightly valuable, or not at all valuable? (Question 18)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Very valuable	1	2	2	0	0	5
Valuable	1	3	0	0	0	4
Somewhat valuable	0	0	1	1	1	3
Slightly valuable	1	1	0	0	0	2
Not valuable	0	1	1	0	0	2
Don't know	0	0	0	0	0	0
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	3	7	4	1	1	16

Source: GAO interviews with active duty commissioned officers. | GAO-25-106618

Note: The total number of respondents is based on the number of officers that responded "yes" to question 14, indicating that they received performance feedback with their most recent performance evaluation report.

Table 21 shows officer responses about which type of performance feedback officers felt was most valuable to their professional development. Approximately one-third of the officers we interviewed responded that feedback provided during ongoing or scheduled feedback sessions—which were not associated with the performance evaluation report received at the end of the performance cycle—was the most valuable.

Table 21: Since January 1st, 2022, which of the following types of feedback would you say has been most valuable to your professional development? (Question 20)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Feedback that accompanied performance evaluation reports	0	2	1	0	0	3
Feedback provided during ongoing or scheduled feedback sessions that did not accompany a performance evaluation report	2	2	1	3	2	10
Feedback provided in response to a specific action	1	2	3	2	1	9
Other type of feedback	3	3	1	0	1	8
Don't know	0	0	0	0	1	1
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	6	9	6	5	5	31

Source: GAO interviews with active duty commissioned officers. | GAO-25-106618

The responses summarized in tables 22 and 23 relate to the communication of performance criteria by raters to the officers we interviewed. Specifically, 20 of the 31 officers we interviewed told us that their raters had communicated performance criteria to them (see table 22). Of those 20 officers, a majority felt that the performance criteria were communicated well to them (see table 23).

Table 22: Since January 1st, 2022, have your performance criteria been communicated to you by your rater? (Question 22)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Yes	5	5	5	4	1	20
No	1	4	1	1	4	11
Total	6	9	6	5	5	31

Source: GAO interviews with active duty commissioned officers. | GAO-25-106618

Table 23: Since January 1st, 2022, would you say that the performance criteria have been communicated very well, communicated well, communicated somewhat well, communicated slightly well, or not communicated at all? (Question 22a)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Communicated very well	2	2	1	0	0	5
Communicated well	0	2	3	3	1	9
Communicated somewhat well	3	1	0	0	0	4
Communicated slightly well	0	0	0	1	0	1
Not communicated well at all	0	0	1	0	0	1
Don't know	0	0	0	0	0	0
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	5	5	5	4	1	20

Source: GAO interviews with active duty commissioned officers. | GAO-25-106618

Note: The total number of respondents is based on the number of officers that responded "yes" to question 22.

Tables 24 and 25 show officer responses to questions about the overall fairness and transparency of their respective military services' officer performance evaluation systems. A majority of the officers responded that their services' systems are at least somewhat fair (see table 24) or somewhat transparent (see table 25).

Table 24: Would you say your service's officer performance evaluation system is very fair, fair, somewhat fair, slightly fair, or not at all fair? (Question 37)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Very fair	0	1	3	0	0	4
Fair	2	4	1	1	2	10
Somewhat fair	3	3	1	2	3	12
Slightly fair	1	0	0	0	0	1
Not at all fair	0	0	1	1	0	2
Don't know	0	1	0	1	0	2
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	6	9	6	5	5	31

Source: GAO interviews with active duty commissioned officers. | GAO-25-106618

Table 25: Would you say your service’s officer performance evaluation system is very transparent, transparent, somewhat transparent, slightly transparent, or not at all transparent? (Question 38)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Very transparent	0	0	2	1	0	3
Transparent	3	2	2	1	0	8
Somewhat transparent	2	6	1	2	4	15
Slightly transparent	1	1	0	0	1	3
Not at all transparent	0	0	0	1	0	1
Don’t know	0	0	0	0	0	0
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	6	9	5	5	5	30

Source: GAO interviews with active duty commissioned officers. | GAO-25-106618

Note: One Marine Corps officer’s response to this question was not recorded during the interview. Therefore, the total number of officers that responded to this question was 30.

Table 26 shows how officers we interviewed responded about how well their respective military services identify officers for promotion. Approximately two-thirds of the officers we interviewed felt that their respective service identifies officers for promotion either well or very well.

Table 26: Would you say your service identifies officers for promotion very well, well, somewhat well, slightly well, or not at all well? (Question 40)

Response	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Space Force	Total
Very well	1	2	2	2	0	7
Well	2	4	3	1	3	13
Somewhat well	3	2	1	1	1	8
Slightly well	0	1	0	1	0	2
Not at all well	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don’t know	0	0	0	0	1	1
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	6	9	6	5	5	31

Source: GAO interviews with active duty commissioned officers. | GAO-25-106618

Appendix VIII: Comments from the Department of Defense



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RESERVE AFFAIRS

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WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-1500

OCT 09 2024

Ms. Brenda S. Farrell
Director, Defense Capabilities Management
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington DC 20548

Dear Ms. Farrell,

Attached is Department of Defense response to the Government Accountability Office Draft Report 24- 106618, "Officer Performance Evaluations in the Armed Forces," dated August 30, 2024. My point of contact is Mr. Kent Bauer who can be reached at kent.p.bauer.civ@mail.mil.

Sincerely,


Ronald T. Keohane

Attachment:
Summary of Recommendations

PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GAO CODE 106618

**“MILITARY OFFICERS: ACTIONS NEEDED TO FULLY INCORPORATE
PERFORMANCE EVALUATION KEY PRACTICES”**

**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATION**

RECOMMENDATION 1: The Secretary of the Army should develop a plan for the delivery of training on the Army’s performance evaluation system to all officers on an ongoing basis.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Secretary of the Navy should ensure the Chief of Naval Operations develop a plan for the delivery of training on the Navy’s performance evaluation system to all officers on an ongoing basis.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Secretary of the Air Force should develop a plan for the delivery of training on the Air Force’s performance evaluation system to all officers on an ongoing basis.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The Secretary of the Navy should ensure the Chief of Naval Operations revise Navy’s performance evaluation system policy to ensure that raters explicitly align officer expectations with organizational goals.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The Secretary of the Air Force should revise Air Force’s performance evaluation system policy or guidance to ensure that raters explicitly align officer expectations with organizational goals.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD partially concurs with this statement. The Department of the Air Force (DAF) does not agree that the evaluation system is aligned only with the Air Force Core Values as stated in the report; rather it believes it is aligned with both the Air Force Core Values and the Air Force’s organizational goals. Air Force Core Values are integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do. To align with those values, the Air Force’s organizational goals are established in policy in both AFI 1-2, *Commander Responsibilities*, and in Department of the

Air Force Instruction 90-302, *The Inspection System of the Department of the Air Force*. Both of these instructions highlight the Major Graded Areas that commanders and units are expected to achieve and what they are evaluated and graded against (Executing the Mission, Leading People, Managing Resources, and Improving the Unit). Once these organizational goals were established, they were used as the baseline for officer and enlisted evaluations and feedback systems. The Air Force further defined the organizational goals and created Airmen Leadership Qualities (ALQs) to further outline and communicate expectations for Airmen and how those ALQs/traits fit into the larger Major Performance Areas. The four Major Performance Areas are broken into ten ALQs used to assess Air Force members: 1) *Executing the Mission* – job proficiency, initiative, and adaptability; 2) *Leading People* – inclusion & teamwork, emotional intelligence, and communication; 3) *Managing Resources* – stewardship and accountability; 4) *Improving the Unit* – decision making and innovation.

Recognizing that there can be confusion between the Air Force's Core Values and organizational goals as they relate to the evaluations systems, and to clarify alignment of Air Force organizational goals with officer expectations, the DAF will examine how to incorporate this requirement most effectively into policy.

RECOMMENDATION 6: The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps revises Marine Corps' performance evaluation system policy to ensure that raters explicitly align officer expectations with organizational goals.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 7: The Secretary of the Navy should ensure the Chief of Naval Operations update the Navy's performance evaluation system policy to identify and define all traits by which officers are evaluated.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 8: The Secretary of the Navy should ensure the Chief of Naval Operations develop a mechanism, such as a signature block on the evaluation report, to acknowledge that competencies and expectations were communicated as part of the Navy's performance evaluation process.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 9: The Secretary of the Navy should ensure the Commandant of the Marine Corps develops a mechanism, such as a signature block on the evaluation report, to acknowledge that competencies and expectations were communicated as part of the Marine Corps' performance evaluation process.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 10: The Secretary of the Army should assess the design, implementation, and outcomes associated with Army's forced distribution model and consider alternatives as necessary based on the findings of the assessment.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 11: The Secretary of the Army should revise the Army's performance evaluation system policy to require the provision of performance feedback to all officers at key points in the process, including the following the completion of a performance evaluation report.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 12: The Secretary of the Army should develop a mechanism, such a signature block on the Army's evaluation report, to capture the provision of performance feedback to officers with their performance evaluation report.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 13: The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps' revises the Marine Corps performance evaluation system policy to require the provision of performance feedback to officers following the completion of a performance evaluation report.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 14: The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps develops a mechanism, such as a signature block on the evaluation report, to capture that feedback is provided to officers at all key points in the Marine Corps' process.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 15: The Secretary of the Army should develop a plan for regularly evaluating the Army's performance evaluation system, including system tools and processes.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 16: The Secretary of the Navy should ensure the Chief of Naval Operations develop a plan for regularly evaluating the Navy performance evaluation system, including system tools and processes.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 17: The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps develops a plan for regularly evaluating the Marine Corps' performance evaluation system, including system tools and processes.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 18: The Secretary of the Air Force should develop a plan for regularly evaluating the Air Force's performance evaluation system, including system tools and processes.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 19: The Secretary of the Navy should ensure the Chief of Naval Operations develop a process to review the results of the Navy's performance evaluation system for bias and accuracy, for example, through reviews of ratings or ratings trends.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 20: The Secretary of the Air Force should develop a process to review the results of the Air Force's performance evaluation system for bias and accuracy, for example, through reviews of ratings or ratings trends.

DoD RESPONSE: The DoD concurs with this recommendation.

Appendix IX: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Kristy Williams, Director, (404) 679-1893 or williamsk@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Ryan D'Amore (Assistant Director), Jennifer Weber (Analyst in Charge), Nicole Ashby, Shea Bader, Vincent Buquicchio, Peter Casey, Jieun Chang, Chad Hinsch, Amelia Koby, Amie Lesser, and Michael Silver made significant contributions to this report.

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