

# Applying Professional Judgment and Experience When Assigning Ratings

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## *A Brief Overview*

The defining "moment" in COA's accreditation process, the moment toward which the agency and its staff have been working assiduously for the last 12 to 24 months, comes when the peer reviewer, having read the standard, determined its intent, and evaluated the evidence, assigns a rating.

Assigning a rating is rarely a black or white, yes/no exercise. Social and behavioral health agencies are complex and vary greatly according to their size, staffing, geographic location, the services provided, the clients served, and many other variables. COA's standards, especially the "G" standards, must apply to many different types of agencies. With this in mind, the standards are written so that they are specific enough to clearly communicate their intent, *and* general enough to be broadly applicable to the full range of services that COA accredits.

## *Professional Judgment and Experience*

This is why professional judgment and experience are so vitally important to COA's accreditation process. You were chosen to be a COA peer reviewer because you are an experienced professional who understands how human service agencies work.

Naturally, assigning ratings is a somewhat subjective exercise. This subjectivity is a basic (but not advertised) part of all accreditation systems. There are two issues in play when assigning a rating:

- First, whether the assigned rating is reasoned and well thought out, and in the end, defensible.
- Second, whether the assigned rating is consistent with the rating that another reviewer would assign to the same standard given the same evidence, and considering the same

organizational variables.

### ***Assigning a Rating: Sticking to the Basics***

The basics of assigning a rating to a standard are:

1. **Read** the standard
2. **Determine** its intent
3. **Evaluate** the evidence, and
4. **Assign** a rating.

The team leader has the responsibility to reaffirm to the team members, these basics of assigning a rating to a standard. This is vitally important to increasing inter-rater reliability and, by extension, the confidence an agency (and its funders!) have in COA's accreditation process. The review process includes a number of mechanisms to increase inter-rater reliability, some of which are the responsibility of the team leader to implement:

- First, it is vital that the reviewer "**stick to the standard.**" This means not applying his or her own ideas as to the meaning of the standard. The team leader is available to assist in this process, and if the team is having difficulty determining the intent of a standard, COA staff is available 24/7 to help.
- Second, is the requirement that all standards that have been rated (3) or (4), have a detailed, written justification for the rating, and that the justifications for ratings of (3) and (4) are **discussed and agreed to by all members of the review team.** This can be done at the end of each day for those standards for which a rating can be finalized at that time, or it can be done at the end of the site visit prior to the exit meeting.

### ***The Role of the Peer Reviewer***

It is also important that reviewers understand their role in COA's accreditation process. It is the Accreditation Commission's role to determine whether an agency will be accredited or not. The

peer reviewer's role is to be the Commission's "eyes and ears." Reviewers are fact-finders and must rate according to what they actually find on site.

If the agency disagrees with a rating that is assigned by a peer, it will have ample opportunity to make its case to the Commission – this is one of the great strengths of COA's process. The Commission will make a reasoned judgment based on all the available evidence (the rating sheets, the agency's response, additional evidence that the agency chooses to submit, evidence that it has remediated any problem following the site visit, and the reviewers thoughts about the agency's response). Based on this evidence the Commission may or may not change a rating. This should not be seen as second-guessing the reviewer by the Commission. This is part of the process and is integral to the integrity of COA's accreditation process.

If you are a team leader, these issues should be put on the table during the first meeting with team members to ensure that the team is working together as they move through their tasks while conducting the site visit. If you are training to be a team leader, you will oversee the site review process, reinforce the training that your team members have had (quite some time ago in many cases), and help your team use their judgment and experience when assigning ratings to standards.

### ***Final Thought***

The exercise of professional judgment and experience by the members of the review team is the single most important factor that you, as a peer reviewer, bring to COA's accreditation process.

Joseph M. Frisino, MSW

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