Context	What makes a performance plan meaningful?
	It describes exactly **what** results and outcomes need to be accomplished, and **how well** they need to be done, in order to be successful in the job.

USDA Policy	There are a few basic policy requirements to start with:

1) If it's important enough to be in the performance plan, it needs to be in the position description.

2) Expectations have to be appropriate for the series and grade of the position.

   For example, you wouldn't give a GS-5 human resources assistant a performance plan that's identical to one for a GS-9 human resources specialist, even if there is some overlap in the kind of work they're doing.

3) At least one element must be mission-results oriented, which means it aligns with one or more agency strategic goals.

4) "Absolute standards", which don't allow for any errors, are only permitted when a single failure could result in loss of life, injury, breach of national security, or great monetary loss. For the vast majority of USDA employees, standards must allow for some degree of error.

5) Plans need to cover *performance* (carrying out the purpose of the position), rather than *conduct* (following the rules).

Critical vs. Non-Critical Elements	Under the old system, elements could be either critical (what the position was created to do) or non-critical (important, but not something for which an employee might be removed or downgraded for failing to accomplish). With the new two-tier system, all elements are critical, so failing the expectations in even one of them would mean an automatic rating of "Unacceptable".

This means there are a few other things to consider when deciding what to put into a performance plan.

1) Expectations in critical elements must be within an employee's control. For example, a scientist can't necessarily control if or when an outside organization publishes their paper, but would be able to control the quality and timeliness of the manuscript.

2) Only supervisors can be held accountable for team performance in a two-tier system. In a three-tier system, employees may have a non-critical element reflecting expectations for a team's results, but that is not permitted in a critical element for non-supervisors.

3) Collateral duties, which are tasks that are outside of an employee's regular role and responsibilities, should not be included in critical elements – if something is not sufficiently core to the position to be included as a major duty in the position description, it's not something for which USDA would be willing to remove or downgrade an employee for failing to accomplish. (It's important to note that refusing to carry out a collateral duty would still carry conduct-related consequences, so it's important to still do them. They just don't belong in critical elements.)

It's important, then, to keep in mind that elements that were non-critical under the old system will not automatically become critical under the new system. Instead, supervisors need to determine whether an element that was non-critical is actually so important to the position that it would be appropriate to downgrade or remove an employee for failing to accomplish it.

Mission Results Element(s)	It's important that performance plans align with the agency's mission, which is why there needs to be at least one element that is specific to mission results. What is not required, though, is for everything that is specific to mission results to be included in just one element. For example, if someone in a Farm Service Agency county office handles both the conservation and price support programs, there can be one element for conservation program responsibilities, and a second element for price support. Both are mission results-oriented, and it might help balance the responsibilities more equitably among the elements.
Customer Perspectives	Customer service is USDA's top priority, and customer perspectives must be reflected in the standards and measures of at least one element. Department-wide policy does not require customer service to be a stand-alone element, but some agencies have decided to handle it that way, which is completely acceptable.
Results and Measures	Performance standards should not be a list of verbs (demonstrates, communicates, analyzes, responds, etc.) Those are duties and belong in the position description. Instead, standards describe *what* needs to be accomplished – the results and outcomes, and measures describe *how well* something needs to be done. They include: • Quality • Quantity • Timeliness • Cost effectiveness • Manner of performance For example: 1) Oral and written communication accurately [there's the quality measure] reflect agency policy. 2) Analyses are completed by the deadline [timeliness measure] established by the supervisor. 3) The draft regulation incorporates the agency's process requirements [quality] and is completed by the end of the 2nd quarter [timeliness]. 4) Options for decisions are shared collaboratively [manner of performance] with team members for their review and feedback at least three weeks before they are due to be finalized [timeliness].
What is NOT Required	1) Performance plans do not have to be long! An element can list a few outcomes and be entirely adequate. For example: • Program information given to the customer is technically accurate according to the current agency handbook. • Program applications are reviewed for completeness and basic eligibility requirements within two business days of receipt. • Funding availability is verified before completed applications are forwarded for final approval. • Weekly reports on sign-up activity are prepared according to instructions included in the agency notice dated January 30, 2020, and uploaded by close of business Thursdays. 2) There is no Department-wide requirement for all plans to have elements for safety and health or protecting personally-identifiable information (PII). They should only be included for positions where the expectations go beyond just following the rules.

3) There is no requirement that each standard include something along the lines of, "with no more than three errors," since there aren't many scenarios where we have tracking systems that continually count such things. Instead, when a supervisor is concerned about mistakes being made or deadlines being missed, they would give the employee specific feedback about the problems right away, establish more detailed expectations, and describe how mistakes will be identified and tracked.

For example, an element could require that written products contain accurate information and be formatted consistent with the GPO Style Manual, and then if the supervisor were concerned about mistakes, they could take the additional steps to provide very specific feedback and establish how many errors would be acceptable.

Final Thoughts

The most important thing to remember about performance plans is that they need to describe what needs to be done, and how well it needs to be done, to be successful *in that particular job*. They don't have to be lengthy, and they shouldn't include things that are not central to success for that position.

It's not critical to get everything exactly right the first time – performance plans can always be updated, and expectations can always be clarified in the quarterly conversations. Just capture the primary outcomes, and the measures that will be used to determine success.