

ELAINE M. ALBRIGHT
Executive Director
Lincoln Trail Libraries System
Champaign, Illinois

Handling Employee Problems

The most effective means of handling employee problems is to recognize and eliminate their probable cause before they arise. The authors of other papers included in these proceedings have provided guidance for avoiding manager/employee problems on a daily basis. If the conditions they discuss are monitored, there should be little need for “handling employee problems.” In order to identify a problem, a supervisor must know and be sensitive to employees’ needs as well as have a comprehensive view of organizational goals. The way in which each employee’s role fits into the overall plan of service should be well defined. With this information, an insightful manager can identify both real and potential problems and deal with them appropriately.

The following areas must be investigated before a supervisor can begin to manage employees:

1. *Job analysis:* Is the job necessary to the organizational goal? Why? How does it fit into the total plan of service? Is it doable? Have the necessary tools been provided? Is the job adequately organized? Are there well-defined areas of responsibility?
2. *Selection:* Do the applicants have the aptitude and potential to do the job? From what can be determined during the interview, do the applicants’ personal goals relate to the stated organizational goals?
3. *Orientation and training:* Has the employee been provided the information necessary to do the job?

4. *Incentives*: Do the rewards of the job meet the needs of the employee — especially the most important need, the need to feel worthwhile?
5. *Appraisal of performance*: Is there an agreement between the manager and the employee to discuss how well the job is being performed?

While this framework for analyzing work situations is always applicable, the answers to the questions asked in each step do change. Therefore, the supervisory approach must be updated daily. If done regularly, supervision will not take much time, and time may actually be saved through the avoidance of problems.

If this formula is effective for avoiding or controlling problems, then why does every manager have problems? No manager ever has complete control over the factors which influence the work environment. Often the cause of a problem is clouded by employee complaints that are not closely related to or associated with the real problem. Some of these areas are:

1. *Social*: It is estimated that by 1980 one out of every four persons entering the labor force will have a college degree. Motivating overqualified people to do routine work is no easy matter. Also, the change in lifestyles experienced over the past twenty-five years influences employees' reactions to their work environment. Most people expect their jobs to be consistent with their lifestyles. Basic value changes influence the traditional "work ethic." The generation gap is widening. One can no longer expect even siblings born within a few years of each other to have the same values.
2. *Economic and technological*: Inflation influences the amount any organization can afford to pay its employees. Advances in technology determine whether or not a routine, boring job can be automated.
3. *Legal*: Equal Employment Opportunity, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, labor unions, and affirmative action control the amount of flexibility an employer has in hiring and in creating a work environment.
4. *Organization itself*: Large organizations are often forced, for economic and efficiency reasons, to utilize civil service or other standardized personnel practices to insure fairness and equality throughout the organization. Job classification, hiring guidelines, pay plans, work hours, etc., are all outlined for supervisors to follow.

In the real world, for a variety of reasons, problems do arise. It is fair to say that a mark of effective supervision is not that there are never problems, but rather that problems can be handled without disrupting the entire organization. As a supervisor gains a reputation for being fair, open and responsive, the number of problems should diminish, for, as a

result, he often will be given the benefit of any doubt in situations that would otherwise lead to resentment or conflict.

The first step in dealing with a problem is to determine why it arose in the first place. This may be the hardest part of the process, since things are almost never what they appear to be on the surface. It is important to examine the work situation objectively. Have all the obstacles to work performance been removed? Obstacles are defined as conditions that prevent job performance: inadequate time, instructions, tools or resources; conflicting orders (too many bosses); or too much red tape.

A distinction should be made between dissatisfiers and obstacles. Dissatisfiers cloud issues but do not prevent the performance of a job (examples are inadequate parking, pay or fringe benefits). They are obstacles to work gratification, but if motivated, an employee will still do the job. A dissatisfier is often a symptom of the problem, not a reason, and it is important to be aware of the difference. A dissatisfier can upset people, but resolution of the condition does not necessarily result in employee motivation. The opposite of dissatisfaction is not satisfaction, but the absence of dissatisfaction.

If obstacles to job performance are discovered, they should be removed — if possible. Some may be beyond the control of the supervisor (for example, bottlenecks in other departments or unpredictable workflow), but it is still important to recognize such problems and attempt to solve them. If a situation cannot be changed, admitting that it is beyond one's control and making the best of it will still be helpful. To continue to pursue a lost cause will frustrate both the supervisor and the employees and result in a loss of confidence in the supervisor's ability to handle problems. Achievement-motivated people will continue to work as best they can. Performance should be evaluated with consideration for the working conditions.

It may be that a job is doable and necessary, but extremely routine. Someone doing such a job may have more time than anyone needs to think up problems. It is wise to consider automating such a position as soon as possible.

Employee problems related to working conditions are the easiest to solve. Removal of an obstacle, once identified, generally eliminates the problem. Once an effective work structure is set up, problems can be anticipated by monitoring changes in external factors affecting the job. The greatest challenge of supervision is in dealing with employee motivational problems unrelated to the working conditions. Resolution of these problems will vary according to the personalities involved. Every employee comes to a job with certain needs and expectations. These are

often not determined by the job or organization, but rather by past and present life experiences. Family, peers, and religious and educational experiences are most influential in determining a person's work attitudes. These attitudes will not be changed easily, but if recognized and understood, they can be used by an experienced and responsive supervisor to organizational advantage.

I believe — and this belief has been reinforced by experience — that all people need recognition and must be made to feel worthwhile. We all are motivated to perform in a way we hope will fulfill this need. What makes individuals feel worthwhile varies. Also, *who* recognizes them makes a difference in their response. Handling "people problems" requires skills other than those taught in library schools, but our success as librarians and information specialists depends on our ability to provide services through the combined efforts of the entire library staff. Getting people to do what is expected with minimum supervision is a key to successful library administration.

Most people perform in a way *they* perceive as good for the organization. They do this in order to be treated as worthwhile by their supervisors and the organization. An effective supervisor finds out what will make each employee feel needed and attempts to supply it. If a supervisor does not voluntarily do so, employees will force recognition by performing in such a way that their supervisor must acknowledge them. An employee's need to be recognized will be manifested in one of two ways: (1) *detractive* — negative performance that will require the supervisor to acknowledge the behavior, and (2) *contributive* — a positive approach furthering organizational goals. A strictly problem-oriented administration may, through its recognition only of problems, generate more problems from employees seeking recognition.

An effective supervisor must convince his employees that his goals and objectives are also theirs. How this is done depends on the supervisor's opinion of human nature — of why people react the way they do. A supervisor's personal attitudes are central to success in handling motivational problems. In order to relate to the problems of employees, a supervisor must understand himself, his attitudes and why he reacts to or interprets behavior the way he does. Just as employees come to a job with needs and expectations, so also does a supervisor manage his department according to a set of standards, expectations and attitudes acquired from his family, peers, education and religion. A manager needs the confidence of his employees in his ability to deal with them in a fair, open and reassuring manner. However, he will not inspire trust if he does not trust himself. If a person is uncomfortable with himself, flexibility

and openness, the two most important characteristics of a good manager, will be difficult if not impossible to achieve. Defensiveness is often the mark of the person unsure of his own identity. Defensive managers are often the *cause* of problems, since they tend to overreact and lose perspective when faced with change, minor problems or conflict. If, in the course of self-evaluation, a person discovers he does not really like people, it would be best for him to avoid supervisory responsibilities altogether.

Knowing oneself is not a guarantee against employee problems, but it is essential for anticipating and recognizing the source of problems when dealing with people of certain temperaments. It is advantageous for a supervisor to hire the kind of persons with whom he can work comfortably. No one can relate to everyone; however, while supervisors cannot expect to "like" or be "friends" with all their employees, they must be able to respect the humanity of others. People have a right to expect no less, and will surely sense negative attitudes. An inability to relate to people will prevent a supervisor from satisfying his employees' need to feel worthwhile. I am not encouraging or condoning discriminatory hiring practices, but supervisors must be realistic about their attitudes and not ask for trouble by ignoring "gut" feelings about a person during the interview.

What happens when problems with an employee continue after obstacles to job performance have been removed, his ability to do the job has been determined, and motivational techniques have been tried? Admit the failure to relate to the needs of this employee and deal with the problem in the best way possible. I recommend to managers the following initial steps: Be absolutely sure that the situation has been viewed as clearly, fairly and objectively as possible. Run through the last five steps outlined at the beginning of this paper. Review the situation with a respected supervisor who is not directly involved. Outline the problem and the solutions that have been attempted. Listen to and analyze the advice or response given. Implement any useful suggestions. If none of these are successful, a manager should talk to his superior. Outline the problem, the solutions attempted and the intended next step. The superior should understand and support the proposed resolution. If the problem cannot be resolved, it may well fall into his hands, and it is never advisable to be overruled in the handling of a problem. Once input has been sought and a manager is convinced that he is being fair, he should talk to the employee.

Boyd outlines what should be avoided in an employee/supervisor discussion of problems. For each approach to be avoided, he supplies an alternative.

<i>What to avoid</i>	<i>What to do</i>
Sarcasm	Consider feelings of employees.
Loss of temper	Cool down, analyze each situation.
Humiliating an employee	Show confidence in the employee's ability to make necessary changes.
Profanity	Carefully explain the nature of the violation and the correction expected.
Public reprimands	<i>Always</i> reprimand in private.
Threats and bluffs	Outline specific consequences of future violations, and follow through.
Showing favoritism	Give every employee fair treatment.
Delay tactics	Give prompt attention to violations.
Unduly harsh penalties	Define the objective of disciplinary action.
Inconsistent enforcement	Deal promptly with all violations of rules. ¹

It is always important for managers to listen to the employee's reaction to the manager's observation of the problem. It may be that the employee perceives the problem differently and discussion may lead to a common resolution. For this approach to work, a supervisor must be flexible and prepared to compromise. Asking an employee for his opinion with no intention of accepting it is worse than not asking at all. Occasionally an employee will offer an explanation worthy of thought or investigation. Managers shouldn't hesitate to admit that the view is new. The employee should be told that his views will be considered and that he will have a response by a certain time. The situation should then be re-examined in light of the additional information. The next time manager and employee talk — and this *must* be soon — they will both be sure they are talking about the same thing. I have used this approach with employees several times and although I have seldom changed my original thinking, the employees have been convinced that I seriously reconsidered the situation. For this reason they are more willing to accept my approach to the resolution of the problem.

It is important that, in the course of the problem-oriented interview, the employee acknowledge that he understands the manager's statements and the improvements expected. This does not necessarily mean agreement or acceptance, since this rarely happens, but such a discussion ac-

completes several things for both the employee and the supervisor. It clarifies the job and the supervisor's expectations of performance; it gives the employee an opportunity to communicate his needs and problems to the supervisor; and most importantly, both learn where they stand in relation to each other. The supervisor, by emphasizing the need for performance, acknowledges that the person and his position are important and worthwhile to the organization.

At the end of the discussion, the employee should feel that the problem lies with his actions, not with him personally. The manager must continue to treat that employee just as he does everyone else. The human temptation to avoid this employee until he meets the manager's standards must be avoided. It may be difficult, but the supervisor *must* act as if the problem employee is a worthwhile member of the staff. A disciplinary discussion should never be held on Friday as this will leave no time for reassurance. There will be too much time over the weekend for defensive attitudes to develop.

Managers should be prepared to follow through with appropriate disciplinary action if the established criteria are not met. Disciplinary action taken as a result of the discussion should *never* be a surprise. It should be clear that if X continues, Y will surely happen. My attitudes when handling employee problems are:

1. The first time: The employee didn't know better. I must have failed to communicate my expectations. I clarify the situation immediately.
2. The second time: The employee was careless. I notify the employee of problems both verbally and in writing.
3. The third time: The employee will be looking for another job.

Although most of the literature on discipline emphasizes the need to administer positive discipline, the most common interpretation of discipline is punishment, and that is almost never positive. Disciplining an employee always provokes negative reactions. Discipline is a last effort to change the actions of an employee who has not responded to positive incentives. When I take disciplinary action or issue a reprimand, I am admitting my failure to relate to the positive needs of that employee.

There *are* positive outcomes of properly administered discipline. The way a supervisor handles discipline will help to set the tone of the office. Avoiding disciplining employees that require it frustrates those who do not need discipline to perform. Frustration leads to demotivation and a leveling of performance. The value of discipline, then, lies more in reinforcing the rules and regulations being followed by those motivated than in making a point with the disciplined employee. We all are concerned about getting fair treatment. It is not good for morale to see some-

one consistently getting away with breaking rules we are told we must follow. At the same time, we are not comfortable seeing unduly harsh treatment for minor offenses. Discipline should fit the offense. In deciding whether or not discipline is appropriate, take into consideration the seriousness of the offense, the action itself, and the past performance of the offender. Is this person normally a motivated worker? What was the intent of his action? What discipline has been administered in similar cases?

Discipline should also be timely. A manager must not watch a recurring problem for weeks before calling attention to it. Each time it is ignored the manager, by his silence, is condoning the action. Delayed discipline may also seem arbitrary and personal. The timing, tone and manner used in administering discipline are all-important. A time should be chosen when the manager's temper is controlled and he is alone with the employee. If the manager is too angry with the employee when the offense occurs, the employee should be told that he will be seen later, and this meeting should take place as soon as possible.

The manager's approach should cause as little damage to his relationship with the employee as possible. He should speak specifically, emphasizing the problems with the employee's action and why it is unacceptable. Once the action is corrected, the manager/employee relationship should be righted. A person reacts differently to being told he has fallen down on the job than he does to being told he is useless and a loafer. All employees resent downgrading aimed at them personally and will not forget it.

According to Dowling and Sayles, discipline accomplishes a strengthening of a rule through enforcement, a correcting of the individual's breach of the rule, and a warning that the individual must comply or face more serious consequences. This acts as a reminder to all employees of a rule's existence and the gravity with which it is regarded, as well as a reassurance for the vast majority who respect the rule out of positive motivation to perform well.²

It is the result, not the discipline itself, that is positive. Douglas McGregor advanced the "hot stove rule" for effective discipline: it should be similar to the reaction one gets from touching a hot stove — immediate, impersonal and consistent. If a supervisor does a good job of disciplining, the employee may feel resentful, but he'll also feel somewhat guilty and foolish about his resentment — as though he had kicked the stove for burning him.³

While discipline can produce positive results, the repeated need to discipline an employee for willful, substandard performance will have an adverse effect on office morale. Very soon the manager's actions will not be taken seriously. Each time an employee slips below standards,

the standards themselves begin to slip. Time spent dealing with a problem employee is time taken from other administrative duties.

The ability to motivate employees depends on the manager's credibility in handling situations that work counter to organizational goals. If control over the library staff is to be maintained, either the problem or the problem employee must be eliminated. Department heads often hesitate or resist firing unsatisfactory employees because they feel it is too difficult. The tension and resentment which results in them and the rest of the staff will drain vital job enthusiasm. The entire workflow will slow with the drop in morale. Managers must not be foolish enough to think that they can ignore a problem situation or that functions around the problem will continue normally — they will not.

Reasonable standards of acceptable performance must be set and employees who willfully fall below them must be eliminated. Of course, severe handling of willful noncompliance must not preclude humane consideration for contributing factors. Lack of humanity on the part of a supervisor will be noted as surely as lack of consistency and it will color employee relations.

There are restraints and guidelines in structured systems, such as civil service and union contracts, which are designed to assure fair treatment for everyone. These systems acknowledge that the supervisor is responsible for enforcing rules, assigning work, running the department, and representing management and the organization's goals. However, some formal employee grievance procedure is usually provided. Unions strive to eliminate inequities and provide employees with benefits they could not achieve individually; they also work to equalize the division of power between management and employee. Supervisory flexibility may be impaired by formal contractual limitations. In some unionized situations, supervisors have lost much of their power to administer discipline; this has been reserved for the labor relations board. The techniques discussed in this paper should remain useful in a union or civil service situation, but they must be adapted to the more formal procedures. It is essential to know a contract in detail in order to act within its rules. All actions should be documented. A person's position as a responsive but effective supervisor can be maintained even though his actions may be restricted or delayed.

REFERENCES

1. Boyd, Bradford B. *Management-Minded Supervision*. 2d ed. New York, McGraw-Hill, 1976, p. 203.
2. Dowling, William F., and Sayles, Leonard R. *How Managers Motivate: The Imperatives of Supervision*. 2d ed. New York, McGraw-Hill, 1978, p. 160.
3. See *ibid.*, p. 161.