

EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

Notes

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Communication Tools

Counseling, cautions, and written requirements are important, often overlooked management tools. These communication tools take a little time and effort, but will reap big rewards—resulting in greater productivity and less headache for you.

This issue of ER Notes will focus on the different types of communication tools used in a variety of employee relations situations, and will give you general information on:

- Conduct, Counseling, and Cautions
- Performance Improvement Periods (PIP)
- Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- Cooperative Resolution Program (CRP)
- Medical or Health Issues

Conduct, Counseling, and Cautions

How well do you communicate with your employees? To maintain a productive work environment, supervisors must *clearly communicate reasonable rules and standards of conduct, and consistently and equitably enforce them*. This can be done orally or in writing, to the staff as a whole, or individually.

The key words are: clearly, consistently, and equitably. Clarifying office rules and stating expectations may seem unnecessary, but poor employee work habits can accumulate over time. Employees may become careless on issues such as attendance, timeliness, lunch hours, phone use, leave requesting procedures, or when and how to report to you. On a regular basis, you may want to remind

your employees of your requirements or office rules in an annual staff meeting, or in an all-hands memo. Keep your communications clear and consistent. A firm and friendly professional approach is best.

If you need to address specific instances of misconduct with one employee, counsel him or her immediately, in private, while the problem is small and manageable. You can follow it up with a memo to reinforce your message. Be fair and consistent; treat all your employees the same to avoid the appearance of harassment or preferential treatment.

If oral counseling does not resolve the situation, a supervisor may wish to reinforce the communication in writing by giving an employee a letter of caution, a letter of direction, or perhaps a letter of leave restriction. Your servicing ER specialist will help you draft these letters.

Performance Improvement

In the area of performance, communication is essential. Employees need regular feedback on their work. Instead of viewing mid-year and annual reviews as a burden, use them productively to communicate performance expectations, achievements, and areas for improvement. Ensure that performance standards and requirements are clearly communicated to the employee. Respond to employee questions on performance, and provide written instructions when necessary.

If an employee falls below the “Meets Fully Successful” in a critical element at any time in the year, a supervisor must place an employee on a

Performance Improvement Period (PIP). A PIP is a nondisciplinary tool to help correct performance deficiencies. A PIP letter will notify the employee of his or her performance deficiencies in critical elements, will outline the required level of performance in order to be considered “fully successful,” and will advise an employee of the need to improve performance or the possible consequence of demotion or removal from the position and Federal service. The PIP is considered an “opportunity period” for the employee to improve performance.

Most importantly, you will need to communicate regularly with the employee during this opportunity period. A supervisor will need to provide assistance in the form of supervisory guidance, meetings, or training. Your servicing ER specialist will help you establish a PIP for your employee and guide you through the process.

Employee Assistance Program

If you believe that an employee has a personal problem that might be impacting the workplace, you should refer him or her to the Employee Assistance Program(EAP). **EAP** is a voluntary, free, short-term, confidential counseling service with the goal of restoring employees to full productivity. EAP offers employee counseling in areas such as debt, alcohol or drug issues, relationships, job concerns, and stress. You can approve an employee up to 1 hour of administrative leave for up to six sessions. Although you can remind an employee about the benefits of this program, you cannot require his or her attendance. The EAP number is 1-800-222-0364.

Managing Work Disputes

In some cases, communications in the workplace simply break down. In situations where there is a conflict or a dispute between employees, the **Conflict Resolution Program (CRP)** may be used to help. The CRP is a voluntary program that uses mediation and trained mediators to assist employees with developing new ways of dealing with a conflict and is an opportunity to resolve disputes quickly at the earliest possible stage. Any employee,

supervisor, or manager can request mediation or assistance in improving communication. The mediation process is confidential. The number for CRP is 301-504-1460.

Medical or Health Issues:

If an employee brings a medical or health issue to you, perhaps as a result of work requirements, counseling, or discipline, and requests *reasonable accommodation*, you should call your ER specialist for assistance in requesting medical documentation. ER specialists can assist you in having medical documentation reviewed by our USDA Medical Officer to determine the best course of action. The American with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that employers provide reasonable accommodation in certain situations, but does not immunize employees from disciplinary actions, provided the agency would discipline a nondisabled employee for similar misconduct.

Effective communication may be the most important thing you do in maintaining a productive workforce. Please do not hesitate to call your servicing specialist with any questions about these issues.