



A New Day for the Civil Service

Employee Relations Practitioners: Some
Approaches to Providing Advice and Guidance
to
Supervisors and Managers

UNITED STATES OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT



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Objectives

Upon completion, the employee relations practitioner will be able to:

- Understand sound approaches in providing ER services
- Identify ways to develop the trust of supervisors for optimum results
- Recognize good listening techniques to successfully interact with supervisors
- Determine steps to good communications with supervisors
- List strategies to achieve efficient and prompt work
- Name a variety of methods for continuous learning

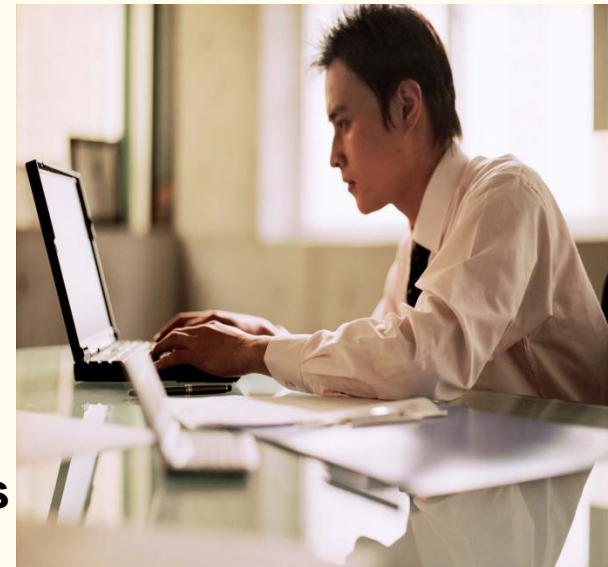
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Overview

- Technical Knowledge
- Ability to Gain the Trust of Supervisors
- Good Listening Skills
- Good Communication Skills
- Efficiency and Promptness
- Continuous Learning
- Conclusion

I. Technical Knowledge

- **To provide accurate guidance, the knowledgeable Employee Relations (ER) practitioner uses applicable**
 - statutes and regulations
 - case law
 - agency policy
 - collective bargaining agreement(s)
 - agency counsel advice instruction
- **Avoids jargon and explains complex information in an understandable way**
- **Properly identifies facts and circumstances relating to**
 - the problem performance or behavior
 - the employee, (e.g., probationary status, performance/conduct record, whether employee is on a performance improvement plan, medical or reasonable accommodation concerns, and other variables)



I. Technical Knowledge (cont'd.)

The knowledgeable ER practitioner is able to:

- **Ask open-ended questions to learn facts and circumstances**
- **Identify a range of approaches, options and possible outcomes, such as**
 - Performance versus discipline approach
 - Counseling memos and how to apply progressive discipline
 - Leave restrictions
 - Performance Improvement Plans
 - Charge drafting alternatives for conduct-related cases
 - Other solutions, e.g., settlement agreements, last chance agreements, and alternative discipline



I. Technical Knowledge (cont'd.)

The knowledgeable ER practitioner:

- **Refrains from guessing when he/she does not know the answer, but researches the issue before responding to the supervisor**
- **Draws on the expertise of other professionals to help formulate advice for the supervisor**
 - Senior-level H.R. management
 - Legal Counsel
 - Medical staff or consultants



I. Technical Knowledge (cont'd.)

The knowledgeable ER practitioner:

- **Thoroughly drafts and/or reviews for accuracy and completeness:**
 - Documentary evidence
 - Proposal and decision notices
 - Performance Improvement Plans
 - Leave restriction/special leave procedures
- **Obtains the review of agency Counsel for legal sufficiency as needed**



II. Ability to Gain the Trust of Supervisors

The ER practitioner gains the trust of supervisors by establishing good work relations with them before there is a need for ER services through:

- Outreach using such measures as supervisory training, briefings, periodic updates
- Meeting with new supervisors to acquaint them with the ER staff and resources



II. Ability to Gain the Trust of Supervisors (cont'd.)

The ER practitioner builds a bridge of trust with supervisors by:

- Assuring the supervisor information will be shared only with those who have a need to know (such as the ER or HR Manager, agency counsel or those in the supervisor's chain of command)
- Demonstrating objectivity
- Complying with legal, statutory and regulatory requirements
- Respectfully communicating frank and straightforward assessments to the supervisor



III. Good Listening Skills

The ER practitioner who is a good listener:

- **Recognizes the supervisor can provide important information about –**
 - The matter at issue
 - The supervisor's role or specific function
 - The requirements needed to get the work done
 - The connection between the employee's performance or behavior and the efficiency or mission of the group
- **Allows the supervisor, when discussing a situation with the practitioner, to provide information without undue interruption**



III. Good Listening Skills (cont'd.)

The ER practitioner who is a good listener:

- **Uses active listening**
 - Concentrates on content rather than the speaker's delivery style
 - Is comfortable with silence; gives the speaker time to think and speak
 - Is adept at asking probing questions in a positive manner
 - Summarizes what the speaker has communicated to ensure common understanding
- **Displays empathy for the difficulty confronting the supervisor**
 - Is aware the supervisor may feel uncomfortable to the ER practitioner and/or in confronting the employee with the problem performance or behavior
 - Suggests tools and techniques to help the supervisor cope with a particularly difficult situation



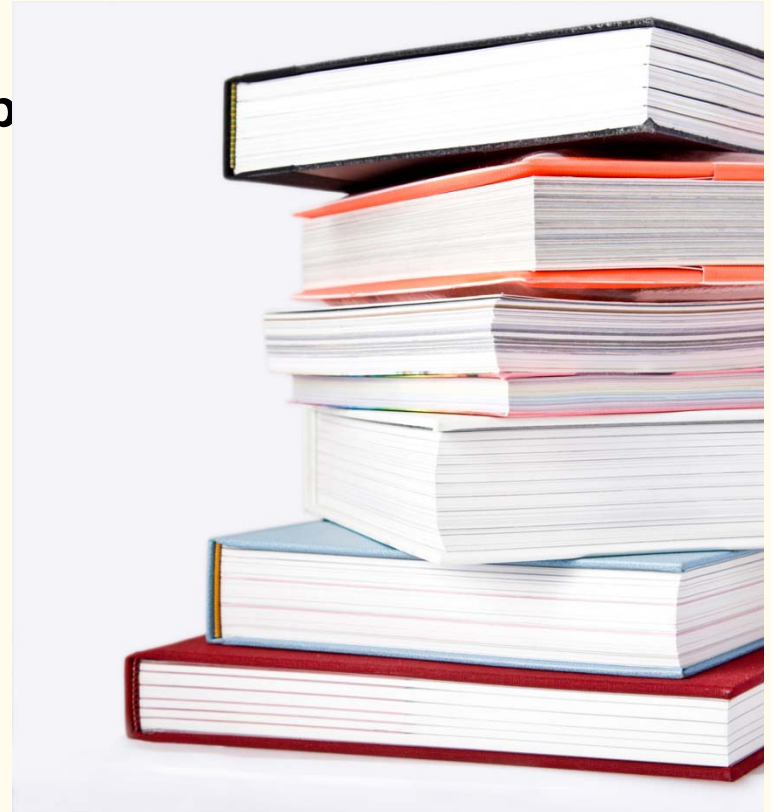
IV. Good Communication Skills

Preparing With Written Aids

The ER practitioner who is a good communicator may provide written resources b

Supplying supervisors with sources of information:

- Statutes and regulations
- Case law
- Agency policies
- Collective Bargaining Agreement(s)
- Other

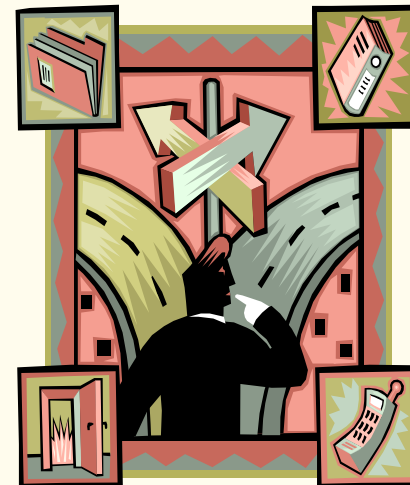


IV. Good Communication Skills (cont'd.)

Providing Supportable Alternatives for Discussion

The ER practitioner who is a good communicator may identify and present various options by:

- **Recognizing the supervisor is often unaware of the range of alternative approaches available**
- **Preparing an analysis of the full range of available courses of action**
- **“Re-communicating” if new information arises**
- **Explaining the possible consequences of each option**



IV. Good Communication Skills (cont'd.)

Getting Your Points Across

The ER practitioner who is a good communicator may use real-world examples by:

- **Reviewing how similar situations have been handled (being careful to maintain required confidentiality)**
- **Discussing past ER situations in which the supervisor was directly involved – what was handled well, what could have been handled differently**
- **Discussing past ER cases in which the handling or procedural steps of a supervisor contributed to third-party success**



IV. Good Communication Skills (cont'd.)

Responding to Questions

The ER practitioner who is a good communicator may handle concerns and questions by:

- **Ascertaining the supervisor's expectations**
- **Explaining the benefits of following ER advice, such as avoiding potential:**
 - Legal liability to the agency
 - Adverse impact to morale and retention
 - Lost productivity of the work unit



V. Efficiency and Promptness

The ER practitioner who is efficient and prompt:

- **Commits to reasonable timeframes, based on**
 - Work priorities
 - Complexity of the case
 - Supervisor's availability
- **Meets agreed-to deadlines**
- **Informs of significant obstacles or changes**



V. Efficiency and Promptness (cont'd.)

The ER practitioner who is efficient and prompt:

- **takes initiative to inform supervisors of factors which affect how soon action can be taken**
- **Makes supervisors aware of necessary prerequisites for taking action (e.g., counseling, valid performance plan, notice periods, etc.)**
- **Helps supervisor understand necessary steps in the process (e.g., gathering and verifying evidence, legal research, etc.)**
- **Outlines when the requirements of applicable laws and rules can impact the case (e.g., reasonable accommodation, Family and Medical Leave Act leave, etc.)**
- **Cautions when new or changing circumstances warrant adjustment to the approach used**



VI. Continuous Learning

The ER practitioner engages in continuous learning by:

- **Becoming familiar with well established ER references and research sources, including case law, legal databases, statutes, and regulations**
- **Attending conferences, seminars, forums, courses, etc.**
- **Asking the ER supervisor about unresolved questions or to obtain clarification**
- **Referring to ER checklists**
- **Obtaining specialized skills such as interpersonal communications, consulting, assertiveness, conflict resolution, leadership, and labor relations**



VI. Continuous Learning (cont'd.)

The ER practitioner may enhance continuous learning by:

- **Consulting with other staff members who have historical knowledge about the agency, its mission and work, and how to best communicate with agency supervisors and managers**
- **Shadowing more experienced ER staff members in meetings with supervisors**
- **Identifying an ER practitioner who can serve as a mentor**



VI. Continuous Learning (cont'd.)

The ER practitioner can target areas for further learning by:

- **Requesting supervisors' input on satisfaction with ER services through one of the following:**
 - Asking for feedback at any time ER work is being performed
 - E-mail invitation for input at close of ER case
 - Brief online questionnaires/surveys
 - Focus groups of supervisors and managers, or
 - Using several of the above approaches



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In Conclusion

Customer service has become one of the cornerstones of management accountability in the Federal sector.

We have provided some suggestions and ideas on how the ER practitioner might continuously hone his/her ability to deliver quality advice and guidance to supervisors using:

- **Expert technical knowledge**
- **Exceptional interpersonal communications**
- **Exemplary commitment**