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Successfully Managing Difficult Personnel:

Focusing on Soft Skills

Michael J. McCall, J.D.

Hiring employees and selecting volunteers is a comprehensive process – criminal and personal background checks, reviewing qualifications, testing, and interviews. So why do all emergency services organizations (ESOs) still end up with their fair share of difficult or problematic employees or volunteers? Simply put, some ESO members essentially manage themselves because they are driven, self-starters, and hard workers. But all ESOs can relate to the small contingency of the workforce that requires more supervision and is often at the center of interpersonal conflict with coworkers. These members are consistently part of workplace problems, rather than part of solutions.

One of the greatest challenges any ESO leader will face is how to manage difficult or problem employees or volunteers (members). Inevitably, the vast majority of a manager's time is spent dealing with these problematic members of the workforce. It is easy to address a member's hard skills, such as operational abilities or adherence to safety standards. Repetitive training and education can generally resolve "hard skills" deficiencies. Influencing a member's soft skills is more complicated and challenging.

A member's soft skills include, but are not limited to:

- *Work ethic*
- *Initiative*
- *Professionalism*
- *Treating others with dignity and respect regardless of position within the organization, gender, race, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and other characteristics or perspectives*
- *Ability to work well with, teach, coach, or assist others*
- *Teamwork (knowing when to lead and when to follow)*
- *Avoiding unnecessary conflict*
- *Leadership*
- *Positive and optimistic attitude (problem solver or problem maker)*
- *Willing to change or be flexible for the betterment of the organization*
- *Communication (good listener, comments contribute to conversations)*
- *Speaks in a respectful manner with supervisors, peers, subordinates and citizens*
- *Provides constructive ideas to improve aspects of the job or work environment*
- *Does not participate in gossip or spreading rumors*
- *Upholds the values, mission, and ethics of the organization*

This article provides best practices guidelines for your ESO to develop difficult members, not simply address them in a punitive manner. The risk management guidelines offered in this article will help an ESO in its implementation and maintenance of sound personnel relations programs.

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Managing Soft Skills Deficiencies

Just because a member is proficient in the operational hard skills aspects of the job doesn't mean he can't be extremely disruptive to the harmony of the work environment. It is not uncommon for an ESO member to hide behind his ability to successfully complete the hard skills of the job, even though his lack of soft skills clearly causes turmoil. He may think, "I show up on time and do my job when called into action."

ESO leaders should consider the following tips for directly addressing disruptive individuals lacking in soft skills:

- *Delays in confronting unsatisfactory performance or conduct communicates such behavior is acceptable.*
- *Soft skills should be spelled out in every job / position description and measured in performance evaluations held during the introductory period and annually.*
- *Conflict management can be facilitated by supervisors or outside human resources consultants to help resolve interpersonal clashes.*
- *Offer periodic training for all personnel, not just difficult employees, on leadership, communication, professionalism, ethics, and teamwork. Outside human resources consultants can work within your ESO to help address specific problems.*
- *Commend all members of the workforce for what they do well, as sometimes a lack of positive reinforcement contributes to poor performance or behavior.*

A Member with a "Bad Attitude"

It is not wise to approach a subordinate and simply say, "You have a bad attitude, or I don't like your attitude." Instead of using inflammatory terms like bad attitude, be specific and give examples of situations when the member's behavior or conduct falls below acceptable ESO standards. Highlight not only the unacceptable performance but also the negative impact on the work environment, coworkers, a particular task, relationship with the public, etc. Consider the following examples:

- *Did the member's temper lead him to cross the line of inappropriate or uncivil behavior which has lowered morale or the sense of harmony in the workplace?*
- *Do coworkers not want to work with the member because of his abrasive or offensive interpersonal relationship traits?*

- *Does the member not provide constructive ideas to help solve problems?*
- *Did the member spread rumors or gossip?*
- *Has a supervisor bullied coworkers?*
- *Did a member divulge confidential information to others outside the organization?*

Negative Paperwork is Not the Solution

Compiling a mound of negative paperwork about a member's performance is not the solution for improving personnel relations and altering behaviors. Those with supervisory and management responsibilities have been repeatedly told to build a paper trail for poorly performing members. Of course it is important to comprehensively document punitive personnel actions, such as decisions to reprimand, suspend, demote, or terminate. It is equally pertinent to diligently document non-punitive efforts to communicate with members whose performance and/or behavior falls below standards.

The question to ask is, "Besides punitive paperwork, what written records exist pertaining to coaching, counseling, performance evaluation, and improvement, goal setting, conflict management, team building, and generally giving members the opportunity to change course in a positive direction?" If non-punitive documentation is thin or non-existent, your ESO may be perceived as an organization that is unfair and uncaring in its treatment of its members.

Ideas for Non-Punitive Personnel Counseling

Counseling or Warning? To label a conversation and corresponding documentation as counseling, rather than a warning pinpoints the non-punitive purpose of the exchange. The goal of verbal and written counseling is to provide a member specific detail as to what should change and constructive ideas or instruction as to how the behavior or performance should improve. Be sure and ask the subject of the counseling session to provide his or her ideas of how performance can be enhanced, conflict resolved, or behaviors altered.

ESO members are more resistant to receiving a labeled written warning than documentation labeled as a counseling session. ESO members associate a written warning as a punitive "write up" and distinguish little difference from a written reprimand. Emphasize the

documentation of a counseling session is for the purpose of member development and not punitive in nature.

Is there a recommended formula as to how many undocumented verbal counseling sessions should take place before a supervisor documents a verbal counseling session? The short answer is no. On one hand, a supervisor's failure to document verbal counseling may lead some to question whether the exchange ever took place. On the other hand, one with supervisory responsibilities doesn't want to be known as the person who "writes members up for every little issue". Verbally calling an issue to a subordinate's attention often leads to altered behavior or improved performance. Particularly when addressing a first time incident or what could be considered a minor issue, a supervisor may be viewed as more equitable to verbally counsel a member without an accompanying write up.

Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) – ESO leaders should consistently utilize a formal PIP with a member who needs a documented structure for performance expectations, accountability, and guidance for accomplishment. A PIP is another non-punitive form of personnel counseling, and more extensive than documenting a verbal counseling session. With a PIP a supervisor establishes a clear written plan with timelines to accomplish and revisit set goals. Developing a PIP involves two-way communication, giving the subordinate the opportunity to provide constructive ideas for improving performance or interpersonal relations, and input on what assistance may be necessary to accomplish goals.

Conclusion

Leaders from every ESO will declare they care about managing interpersonal relations and strengthening workplace morale. However, intentions and actual execution are very different in regard to handling personnel matters. Check to ensure your organization institutes regular, non-punitive performance counseling, performance improvement plans, and training to help develop all members of the workforce.

Michael McCall, J.D., provides employment practices consulting and training to emergency service organizations nationwide.