

Employment Practices

UPDATE

**Does it seem
that 5% of your
employees
create 95% of
the problems
for your
organization?**

Dealing with “Problem” Employees or Volunteers

Corrective counseling or discipline is straightforward when an employee or volunteer for your emergency services organization (ESO) violates an operational or safety regulation. For an ESO supervisor it is easy to take action when an employee or volunteer breaks these clearly established, typically written rules.

Every organization, however, has “problem” employees or volunteers (members) who seem to be at the root of most headaches for supervisors and administrators. Rather than breaking rules, “problem” members seem to bend the rules and “push the envelope” to see what they can get away with. They are known for their negativity, defiance, and resistance to change. They may spend a lot of time “badmouthing” the ESO and “bashing” management, while offering little to no constructive criticism.

There is an old saying that 5% of your employees or volunteers create 95% of the problems for your organization. This article explores positive, outcome-oriented suggestions for dealing with those often labeled as “problem” employees or volunteers. The goal is not to figure out a way to get these people out of your ESO. Instead, strive to help turn “problem” members into “quality” ESO members.

Look in the Mirror

None of us are perfect supervisors, managers, or administrators. Don't be in denial—the “problem” member isn't to blame for everything. Search for solutions rather than blame. Look long and hard in the mirror to see how you can do a better job. How can the leaders of your ESO improve their supervisory, coaching, counseling, and team building skills to help turn around the “problem” employee or volunteer? Examine your weaknesses and ask those you trust to help identify them.

A minor change or adjustment in your supervisory methods or style can help solve a major problem.

Don't Make Hasty Decisions

“Problem” members are notorious for knowing how to push your buttons. They know how to get you to a boiling point. Don't let your emotions get the best of you. Hasty and rash decisions by supervisors and administrators can land your ESO in legal hot water. In fact, making a decision to terminate in the heat of the moment is one of the most common mistakes by ESO leaders. Hasty disciplinary decisions are often not supported fully by adequate documentation. Take time to ensure decisions are being made in the best interest of the members involved and the ESO.

Check Your Bias

Make sure the “problem” member is being treated consistently with other workers.

Continued

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DEALING WITH “PROBLEM” EMPLOYEES OR VOLUNTEERS

(Continued)

Sometimes supervisors are biased against the labeled “problem” member more than they realize. Ask the question, “How were other members disciplined for similar acts or performance in the past?” Inconsistency in determining and administering discipline can lead to liability exposures.

Give the Member Every Reasonable Chance to Succeed

When the “problem” member’s negativity and bad attitude has tested the limits of your patience, the easy way out is to fire the individual. The easy way out is often the same road that leads straight to the courthouse. Judges and juries believe that there are many options available to your ESO that don’t involve termination.

Coaching and Counseling -

Consistent, open, two-way communication is an integral part of personnel management. Take time to sit and talk with members in an attempt to understand the root cause of problems. To encourage open dialogue, remain calm, communicate positively, and above all, be respectful. Being critical or accusatory is not the way to motivate people to improve their performance or attitude. Don’t forget to document counseling and coaching sessions.

Performance Improvement Plan

(PIP) - Your job as an ESO leader is not to change people, but instead give them every reasonable opportunity to change themselves. Developing a formal performance improvement plan (PIP) is a crucial, member-friendly practice. A PIP is a joint effort between a supervisor and subordinate to establish a two-way plan of increased communication, guidance and accountability. Supervisors ask questions like, “How can the ESO and I enable you to better meet the responsibilities of your position?”

In turn, a plan is documented holding the member accountable in meeting time-specific goals. Follow-up meetings are pertinent to the success of a PIP.

It is recommended that another supervisor or administrator be involved in the development of the PIP, rather than leaving the process solely to the member’s immediate supervisor. Often a less than ideal working relationship between a member and his immediate supervisor is a contributing factor to work-related problems. Also consider consulting with the ESO’s labor and employment attorney in the process of developing a PIP to help mitigate future problems.



Your job as a leader is not to change people, but instead give them every reasonable opportunity to change themselves.

Team Building - ESO members clearly understand the importance of teamwork in the operational functions of the organization. Like the need for operational teamwork, positive interpersonal relations and teamwork is vital. Frustrations, anger and anxiety associated with managing “problem” members can take a toll on morale within your ESO. Attempts at team building, conciliation and mediation should all be considered or exhausted before a member is terminated.

Train Supervisors and Administrators -

Giving those with supervisory authority tools to manage all personnel is a key to improving your work environ-

ment. “Problem” members are more likely to become quality members if their supervisors become better leaders. Your ESO’s supervisors and administrators should receive periodic training on the following subjects:

- Leadership skills
- Coaching and counseling
- Developing performance improvement plans
- Performance evaluations
- Conflict management
- Team building
- Harassment, discrimination, and workplace violence prevention
- Reviewing and following the ESO’s written personnel policies and procedures
- Ongoing documentation of personnel performance, attitude and teamwork; and
- Dealing with difficult personnel.

“Doing Nothing” Is Not an Option

Be warned against the “do nothing” option. A “problem” member sets a bad example for everyone else, lowers morale, destroys teamwork, and decreases results. Confronting a difficult member is never a pleasant experience. Avoiding a problem and confrontation may be more attractive at the time, but will lead to bigger problems in the future. Moreover, many ESO leaders fear litigation that may stem from discipline or termination. After all, the “problem” member is a logical candidate to hire a lawyer and sue the ESO for wrongful discharge, failure to promote, or wrongful demotion.

Remain positive and determined. “Problem” members may surprise you when given the proper guidance and support to succeed. Show the ESO cares and is fair. Termination should always be the last resort. If at the end of the day the “problem” member doesn’t make the effort to improve performance and attitude, he will have no one to blame but himself.

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