

BASIC TRAINING FOR SUPERVISORS



DOCUMENTATION AND EVALUATIONS



DOCUMENTATION: WHY BOTHER?

Picture this: It's the middle of a long, busy — not to mention stressful — day and you're wondering how you're going to meet the next deadline. Then you overhear one of your employees telling a dirty joke within earshot of your whole crew.

Just what you needed, huh? An employee violating your company's harassment policy, and it's not his first time. You sternly tell him to cut it out and stop telling dirty jokes at work. He seems to get the message.

Are you done? You have the nagging feeling that you should fill out some sort of disciplinary form, especially since this is the second time you caught him telling dirty jokes. But you convince yourself that you don't have time to drop everything just to do paperwork. It's not that big a deal, right?

Actually, documentation *is* a really big deal. It protects you and your employer, creating proof that you're running your department the way you should.



This booklet, *Basic Training for Supervisors: Documentation and Evaluations*, is designed to help you be a better supervisor by teaching you how to shake off any tendency to avoid creating written records and, instead, embrace the importance of

documentation. Plus, you'll learn a few tips on how to get the job done.

**'If it's not in writing,
it didn't happen'**

That's how some lawyers describe the importance of documentation. If you're on the witness stand two years from now, how can you convince the court that you really did warn your employee not to tell dirty jokes at work? If you didn't write it down, then it's your word against his.

In court, the pen is mightier than your fuzzy memory.

**KNOW YOUR
RESPONSIBILITY**

As a supervisor, you've got your hands full keeping your employees on track. You may be tempted to wonder, "Why should I be expected to fill out forms, write memos, and struggle with performance evaluations when I'm so busy tending the

well-oiled machine that my department is?"

The answer to that question lies in the fact that your documentation can be the oil that keeps the organizational machine humming instead of breaking down at the worst possible time.

As a manager or supervisor, you know better than most that problems come up in the workplace. You deal with everything from tardy or absent employees to allegations of discrimination, harassment, violence, or other kinds of mistreatment. No matter how well you handle those problems, your actions can be meaningless if there's nothing down in black and white to document that you've taken steps to solve problems and right wrongs.

One lawyer bluntly tells supervisors, “If you don’t have time to document properly, then you shouldn’t be a supervisor.”

WHO’S GONNA READ THIS STUFF?

There are many situations when it’s important that an employee’s personnel file has thorough, accurate documentation from you. A few examples:

- ◆ If you want to fire someone for a long-term performance problem, your company probably will want to see documentation of the problem and your warnings to the employee. Otherwise, you might not be allowed to fire him.
- ◆ If an employee gets a new supervisor, she may need your written record of the employee’s performance and conduct.
- ◆ When you’re writing a performance evaluation, you should read last year’s evaluation to help you judge what the employee’s done since then.
- ◆ If one of your employees ever sues your employer, then the lawyers, judge, and jury will expect you to have written records to back up your story.

KEEPING LEGAL

Poor documentation may be bad management, but does it make you a lawbreaker? No, but it can make you look like one.

You have to choose an employee to lay off, and you pick Bertha, a loudmouth with a bad attitude who’s your slowest worker and makes a lot of mistakes.

Unfortunately, you never wrote down these problems in her performance evaluations. She sues your company, saying she's a good worker (look at her evaluations!). She claims the real reason you laid her off is illegal retaliation because she forcefully confronted the CEO about the company health insurance at a meeting last month. Now you have to convince the court that you gave her inaccurate evaluations — ouch!

The point is that your records are often what makes the difference between winning and losing an employment lawsuit. Of course, you hope disputes don't go all the way to the courtroom. Even if your employer wins a case, just going to trial is expensive and distracting. But again, your documentation is vital because solid documentation of an employer's action can be instrumental in discouraging employees from filing lawsuits.

WHAT SHOULD YOU WRITE DOWN?

Think about some of the employment-related topics you're expected to keep records on:

- ◆ Hiring decisions;
- ◆ Disciplinary matters;
- ◆ Employee performance;
- ◆ Promotions and commendations; and
- ◆ Demotion and termination decisions.

Do any of those issues ever prompt complaints? Of course they do! You know you'd better have good reasons for choosing one job applicant over another. You know you'd better have

your facts straight before meeting out discipline. You know your employees deserve to know if they're



meeting expectations on performance.

Likewise, you know you need to keep track of when and why employees are promoted, rewarded, demoted, and fired.

Those are the kinds of issues that can make a rejected applicant, current employee, or ex-employee mad enough to make trouble. But you can stop someone bent on suing if you're careful to dot your i's and cross your t's. If you've done the right thing — and usually you have — you can prove it through your documentation.

OTHER REASONS TO DOCUMENT

Keeping good records goes beyond staying out of legal trouble. It's part of your job to give your employees feedback that will keep them learning and improving.

What kind of documentation can help along those lines? Performance evaluations may be the best form of documentation to aid employee development. A carefully written evaluation communicates to an employee what he's doing right, what's not so right, and what's expected in the area of improvement.

