10 Minute Supervisor Trainings

September 2021

Conservation District Personnel

Every conservation district office has one or more office staff that they have chosen to represent them. They are the FACE of your conservation district. They are the people who meet and greet the public, go into schools, make farm visits and keep your office running. In order to be successful, each district board needs to ensure that the people that they employ are good at what they do. This requires good communication, honest evaluations and clear expectations from both the employee and the board of supervisors. In this training we will talk about all of these topics as well as some pointers for making sure both sides are happy….and successful.

Let's start with hiring – no employee will be there forever and at some point, the board members will have to go through the hiring process.

The essential first step is for the board to thoroughly discuss what responsibilities and skills this person will have and how well you will compensate them. Remember to use input from your NRCS personnel and field representative as they may know more about the day-to-day requirements of the job.

Some of the topics that must be discussed include, but are not limited to:

- Compensation (including wages, overtime pay VS comp time, vacation or sick leave, carry over hours, termination pay, insurance, retirement, etc.)
- Duties (bookkeeping, education, errands, reporting, coordinating meetings, etc.)
- Job Descriptions: (The requirements of every district change over time and the expectations of the employees change with those requirements. Every employee must have an up-to-date job description that outlines the goals, duties and expectations for the job and lays out all pay and benefit information.)
- Office issues (office hours, dress code, travel, reimbursements, training, etc.)
- Evaluations (probation period, how to evaluate, expectations, etc.)
- Supervision: (Choose a designated board member to answer questions, give direction, check in on the employee, be the contact for call-ins, etc.)

Now you are ready to advertise, interview and hire. A simple ad with a general description needs to be advertised for at least one week in the local paper, newsletter, radio or online. Applicants can submit a resume, or you can produce your own application. Either way, require a few references that you can call and talk to. It is good business to interview at least 3 candidates by the whole board or just the personnel committee. If you don't get the right applications – do not just hire one! Re-advertise, review the pay and benefits, and ask yourselves why you didn't get good applicants.

Notes: Hire someone suitable for the position. You want to hire someone qualified that can deal with the public, be good at finances and operate financial software to run your office. Be sure that they have the skills that your district needs. You are in charge of hiring the best person for the position. Before hiring, be sure to check your code of ethics for nepotism and other hiring details.

A probationary period is an important tool for the district. This will give you an opportunity to do a background check or just to give them a trial run. The position may not be right for the person you hired. This gives you the legal opportunity to simply let them go.

No matter how satisfied a district is with staff performance, it is still essential from a business and legal standpoint to establish a time each year for employee evaluations. Most districts do this right before they set the budget for the coming year to determine salary or benefit increases. This is the time for both the board and employee to be 100% honest with each other to identify what is going well and what is not. This gives the employee and the employer a time to voice any needs or concerns that are or are not getting addressed. The time of evaluations also gives the board the chance to update the job description for each employee. All evaluations should be handled in a professional and businesslike manner. All issues (both good and bad) should be discussed. This will also act as documentation for any future matters. Evaluations can be done by a committee or by the full board, but they must be done in an open meeting. Don't know exactly what to ask? There are sample evaluations on the DOC website. Never be afraid to reach out to your field rep and surrounding counties for examples.

When a problems arise: When issues arise – no matter how big or small, they need to be addressed immediately. It is very important to establish a contact person to mediate these issues. This person should not be a co-worker but rather a board member that the employee feels comfortable with. This member can then take the information to the personnel committee. The personnel committee can gather information and act as the mediator between the employee and the board. All issues and any follow up should be documented by the committee or board in a personnel file.

Smaller infractions, such as tardiness, dress code violations, issues with the public, etc. should be documented in writing with each occurrence. Larger infractions such as harassment, discrimination, stealing/embezzlement, violence, etc. should not be tolerated and should be dealt with immediately by the board. It is the responsibility of the board to make their office free of these issues and to deal with problems as they arise. The employee can then be warned and have an opportunity to correct their behavior. Poorly performing employees can reflect negatively on the board and within the community.

Dismissal – What you should know:

When legally firing an individual, you must have documentation of when you have tried to resolve issues by speaking with the employee or giving them a warning. The things mentioned above that are inexcusable should be handled immediately by firing the employee on the spot and requesting that they leave the grounds with only their personal possessions. As long as it is justified and documented, it is the right of any business to excuse any employees with just reason. When an employee does leave, there are several things that the board should do immediately. These include requesting keys, changing locks (if necessary), changing passwords, notifying IT of computer changes (if the district has an NRCS computer), notifying the Division of Conservation, etc.

Training and Networking

No matter how long an employee has been in your office, they will need continued training. Boards should provide whatever is necessary for their employee to learn new skills - such as networking with other offices, attending conferences or taking a Quickbooks course, etc. The Kentucky Association of Conservation District Employees offers monthly share sessions that are very valuable as well as a yearly training conference. Division of Conservation also offers an abundance of tools on their website as well as numerous program training throughout the year. Networking among counties is a highly beneficial way to train on daily office duties. There is also training provided by various state agencies for everything from CAIP to retirement and in between. The yearly KACD convention is an excellent opportunity to meet others, learn more about programs and catch a glimpse at how other districts run. A district board should never be hesitant to give their employee a chance to get better at what they do!

Districts are required to follow all applicable state and federal labor laws; however, many employee issues are left to the board's discretion. All policies that are made by the board should be reflected in the board's policy and procedures manual so that the board members and employees can make sure that they understand what is required. These can then be reviewed yearly to make necessary changes.

Taking a thorough look at your employees and your policies is good for all conservation districts and an essential key to making your office successful!