Handling Personnel Issues on Outlying Experiment Stations
(Or How to Manage as an HR Department of One!)

In the Research Center Administrators Society's Statement of Principles, you recognize your responsibility to address "any issue that may affect the operation of [your] research facilities." If you experience a serious and/or prolonged personnel issue, it can definitely affect your operations! So with that in mind, the following information is offered to help you identify needs and to help you deal efficiently and effectively with personnel issues at your experiment stations.

It is true you that are a one-person HR department at your site, but it is important for you to remember that you have back-up. First and foremost, know your organization's resources. At the top of the contact list (and the number that should be on speed dial) is your HR liaison. Other resource offices at most colleges and universities include Legal, EOO and an EAP. At the first sign of a problem, you should immediately call your HR rep. Hopefully, that rep will be able to independently answer most of your questions and will be willing to act as a liaison to other offices for matters that require additional institutional input.

It is also very important for you to know your local resources. You should have phone numbers and contact names for local medical facilities and health care providers, including mental health care providers. It would be a good idea to be familiar with your local law enforcement personnel and who to contact for various needs. Of course, "911" is always a good resource. In addition, ask each of your employees to provide the name(s) and number(s) of person (s) who would serve as an emergency contact(s), "just in case."

Whereas it would be difficult (almost impossible!) for you to be an expert in all areas of human resource management, it is necessary for you to have a general knowledge of your organizations basic operating rules which are generally based on Federal, State and local laws, policies, procedures and practices. The most significant are the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), non-discrimination/anti-harassment policies, Workers' Compensation policies, alcohol and other drugs policies and workplace violence policies.

Once you have this infrastructure of information and support, you must establish and maintain the "people structure." You are the person who sets the tone for your entire operation and it is your leadership that will be reflected back to you from your staff.

Each person who works for you deserves to know three things: "These are our policies." "These are my expectations for you." "Here's how you are doing."

As a leader, it is your responsibility to: appropriately share information; lead by example; get people involved; listen to concerns; take appropriate action to show you care; tell people what they are doing right; focus on solutions, not problems; focus on the issue, not the person; deal with mistakes in private; use mistakes to teach; think beyond the moment. Regardless of the number of theories and models and books and articles on leadership, it really boils down to the

few basic lessons learned in childhood: tell the truth and keep your promises, earn respect through competence (not only "technical" competence, but leadership competence), treat others with respect and always say "please" and "thank-you."

If problems arise in the workplace, deal with them while they are "little." Most problems do not just "go away" and in fact, tend to grow into "big" problems. When you address issues, it is important to be fair, consistent and timely in your approach. The purpose of an intervention is to correct a problem. Most organizations have established policies for dealing with unsatisfactory performance and conduct that follow a progressive discipline model. Simply stated, progressive discipline means that corrective measures (discipline) are applied in several stages of severity, culminating if necessary in dismissal. The usual sequence is verbal counseling, written counseling, suspension without pay and termination of employment.

A cornerstone in this process and in fact, in management practices, in general, is the appropriate use of documentation. Documentation should be viewed as a useful tool to capture both the positive and the not-so-positive (negative) performance and conduct of your employees. It is very important to record actual observed behaviors and to avoid speculation and editorial comment. In almost all organizations, employees have access to any information the employer holds about them. Maintaining only objective, constructive documentation and sharing the documentation at the time a situation arises helps prevent future issues and lets the employee know your position.

When it is necessary to address a problem, there are several documentation basics to follow. State the expectations that are not being met by specifying failings in terms of performance or behavior, note your expectations going forward, cite any prior corrective counseling that has been done and indicate the consequences if the problem continues. Be careful to avoid using labels ("bad attitude") or medical terms ("you seem depressed"); absolutes ("always"); legal labels ("sexual harassment"); "proxy adjectives" that suggest bias ("resistant to change" or "too emotional"); or hedges ("it appears" or "it would seem.")

Since you are all a part of a larger organization, it is important to maintain a visible connection to that organization. It helps your employees to know their role in the "big picture" and to see how their efforts at your location serve and support the mission of your college or university. It is also helpful for your employees to know that there are rules and regulations to which they are accountable regardless of the remoteness of your site. Visits to the main campus on a routine basis and asking reps from the main campus to come to you on a routine basis help to maintain the connection and help staff to feel part of the larger organization.

Along this same line, keep in mind that your staff should be able to enjoy the same benefits as headquarters employees for personal and professional development. It may be necessary for you to remind central offices of your needs and to arrange opportunities for training at your facility at least several times throughout the year. Another strategy is to invest in distance learning technologies and to allow your employees to participate in centrally-offered programs as often as possible.

There are a couple of circumstances that might arise that would demand your immediate attention. As always, seek the advice of your HR office but if you can't reach outside assistance, it is critical that you know how to respond to an employee under the influence of alcohol or other drugs in the workplace and how to respond to a threat or an incidence of workplace violence. In both situations, you may need to act quickly to prevent an employee from harming self or others.

There are generally early warning signs for both of these potential problems. In the case of alcohol or drug use/abuse, you might observe pattern absenteeism such as one or more Mondays missed per month. You might also notice a change in personal appearance and grooming and a loss of attention to details in work. There might be a smell of alcohol on the person. Unsatisfactory attendance is actionable and should be dealt with appropriately. Smell of alcohol is justification for counseling. If there is a smell of alcohol and observed motor and/or speech impairment, you need to act quickly. Have another management person observe the employee and then confront the employee with the observed facts. Do not allow the employee to continue working, especially, do not allow the employee to perform a safety sensitive function or to drive if you think they are impaired. Arrange transportation to get the employee home. (This is when having emergency contact numbers comes in handy!) Consult with your HR as soon as possible thereafter to determine appropriate disciplinary action.

Workplace violence is a serious threat that has been on the increase in recent years. No "profile" or litmus test exists to indicate whether an employee might become violent. Instead, it is important for employers and employees alike to remain alert to problematic behavior that, in combination, could point to possible violence. No one behavior in and of itself suggests a greater potential for violence, but all must be looked at in totality.

Risk factors at times associated with potential violence include personality conflicts (between coworkers or between worker and supervisor); a mishandled termination or other disciplinary action; bringing weapons onto a work site; drug or alcohol use on the job; or a grudge over a real or imagined grievance. Risks can also stem from an employee's personal circumstances— breakup of a marriage or romantic relationship; other family conflicts; financial or legal problems; or emotional disturbance.

Problematic behavior also can include, but is not limited to:

• Increasing belligerence
• Ominous, specific threats
• Hypersensitivity to criticism
• Recent acquisition/fascination with weapons
• Apparent obsession with a supervisor or coworker or employee grievance.
• Preoccupation with violent themes
• Interest in recently publicized violent events
• Outbursts of anger
• Extreme disorganization
• Noticeable changes in behavior
• Homicidal/suicidal comments or threats

Many times, a violent act is preceded by a threat. The threat may have been explicit or veiled, spoken or unspoken, specific or vague, but it occurred. In other instances, behavior may be observed by others, which might suggest the potential for some type of violent act to occur. Yet in other cases, it may be the off-handed remark or comments made to people close to the individual, which may suggest problematic behavior. Dealing with threats and/or threatening behavior—detecting them, evaluating them, and finding a way to address them—may be the single most important key to preventing violence. You should tell every employee that your organization has a zero-tolerance for workplace violence and that every employee has an obligation to report any act or threat of violence immediately. Tell each employee to whom and how to report.

Most organizations have formed a threat assessment team, crisis response plans, emergency response teams and/or post-incident response teams. Make sure that you remind "headquarters" that you need appropriate guidelines for your site(s) and that you must be given full and immediate access to these teams' services if the need arises. Also, develop your own plans and communicate those plans to all staff. Again, know your local resources and the fastest way to get in touch with them.

The topics covered in this presentation each warrant in depth-discussion through your own HR departments. The goal of this presentation was simply to provide food for thought on the most essential personnel components of running an outlying research station. In closing, I urge you not to feel alone or overwhelmed. You have a wealth of support at your fingertips and your own good instincts and management expertise to rely upon. Don't ever hesitate to ask for help. Don't ignore trouble. And always remember the "platinum rule:" "Do unto others as they would have you do unto them."

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