

## A Practical Approach to Employee Relations

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### Definition

*Employee Relations describes the quality of the relationship between an organization (represented by identifiable leadership) and its employees (represented by non-management employees). The discipline of employee relations examines this relationship from the employee's viewpoint. This relationship is shaped by the degree of employee satisfaction with the workplace. The foundation theory of employee relations is that satisfied employees work better and smarter. While there are several dimensions to employee satisfaction, this newsletter will focus on how employees are treated and the downside of allowing ill-tempered employees to mistreat their peers or supervisees. Further, employees caught up in what they perceive to be annoying, unfair, or abusive treatment by a fellow staff member are less productive personally, and tend to spread this unhappiness to others, both inside and outside your organization.*

### Evolution of the concept

Focus on employee satisfaction developed as disgruntled employees brought unions into the workplace during the '40s & '50s in response to unsafe/unhealthy working conditions and unfair management practices. Today's environment of highly mobile employees, significant training costs, and workforce shortages have created heightened interest in keeping employees satisfied and productive – thus the interest in employee relations. Lastly, happier employees are less likely to bring damaging lawsuits against their employer.

### Practices that promote positive employee relations

- Strong, competent senior leadership
- Clear management values and philosophies
- Candid communication with all employees about important matters
- Collaborative problem-solving with employees at all levels
- Holding all staff (particularly supervisory staff) accountable in a consistent, professional way

### Practices that promote negative employee relations

- Lack of leadership vision and philosophies
- Inconsistent standards for employee conduct
- Unclear or unrealistic performance standards
- Unclear job content
- Mistreatment of employees by a peer or supervisor

### Challenges for nonprofits

A problem nonprofits face in maintaining positive relations with staff is the ever-present stress associated with understaffing. Further, employee relations acumen is learned over time in a system where it is modeled, encouraged and where there are swift consequences for employee mistreatment. The luxury of this kind of environment is generally present only in the for-profit world where supervisors may take advantage of ongoing management training in more subtle, advanced management practices.

### When you don't address ill-tempered staff

Serious consequences result from employee mistreatment. Studies show that work quality suffers when employees are distracted by gossip, complaints and subterfuge. More importantly, employees can be harmed - develop stress-related physical symptoms. Finally, disgruntled employees often share their negative viewpoint in the community making it difficult to maintain credibility as a professional workplace.

### Practical tips

Maintaining a positive relationship with employees requires both preventive measures as well as a sound approach when issues arise. Preventive measures are good employment screening, regular staff meetings, good supervision, particularly for supervisors, and making clear exactly what is considered respectful treatment. Once problems develop, it makes good business sense to respond fairly by investigating the issues, being clear how you want the offending employee to treat others, and demonstrating that certain behaviors are not tolerated.