



UNIT-14

Office Management & Supervision

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Adjust to the supervisor's role with confidence.
- ✓ Develop your skills in listening, asking questions, resolving conflict, and giving feedback to employees.
- ✓ Identify key attitudes that you can develop to enhance your supervisory skills.

Unit 14

Office Management and Supervision

As your career evolves over time, it may naturally lead to a role as an office manager or supervisor. In a small office, you may run the overall operations of the office while your boss focuses on business relationships. You may be responsible for interviewing new employees and filtering out the best for your boss to meet in follow-up interviews.

Organizational Structure

The way the business you work for is organized will vary depending on its business objectives, what tasks it must accomplish, and how those tasks are allocated, coordinated, and supervised. The most common organizational structure is hierarchical, with a top-down structure of managers and direct reports. The organizational structure may include different business entities, such as branches, departments, and workgroups.

The organizational structure of a business provides a foundation for its operating procedures and determines which individuals participate in the decision-making process.

Small Business Structure

Many small businesses rely on a strategic leader who makes all key decisions. Most communication is handled by one-on-one conversations. This type of organizational structure enables the founder of a business control over growth and development.

Hierarchy Structure

Some large businesses rely on a bureaucracy that has a strict hierarchy of managers and with subordination of their direct reports. The organizational structure of a large business may include divisions or subsidiaries that are further divided into departments. Departments are further divided into functional teams, each with its own manager.

Division Structure

The divisions of a business usually are structured around a particular product or service. Each division includes all the necessary resources and functions to operate as if it were an independent business. Sometimes divisions are further subdivided geographically to better serve customers of a particular country or region.

Matrix Structure

A matrix structure groups employees by both their function and the product or service offered. Teams of employees work together to take advantage of strengths and to make up for weaknesses.

In one type of matrix structure a project manager oversees the functional aspects of the project and maintains control over employee resources assigned to the project. Another type of matrix structure includes both project managers and functional managers.

Work Team

One of the newest structures is the work team. In a small business, the work team may be the entire organization. Teams may include a variety of employees who perform different functions or a group of employees who perform the same function. For example, a work team may be all the employees of a particular store within a much larger company. Another example would be all of the employees working together on a software development project.

Network

Another new organizational structure is the ad-hoc network, where managers hire vendors or teams of contractors to perform services or supply products. The managers spend their time coordinating these external resources. An example of this structure would include a company that has outsourced various aspects of its service or manufacturing business to outside vendors. In some cases, the network may include vendors from all over the world.

Virtual Team.

With the availability of email and Web conferencing software, some organizations use virtual teams that rarely meet together face to face. Sometimes a virtual team consists of a manager and various contractors or suppliers that form a network structure. Other times, the members of the virtual team may be employees who work at various offices scattered around the country or in their homes. The virtual team structure is common with software development and consulting services.

The Role of the Office Manager

Office managers often hold one of two jobs in a company. They may supervise people or they may be involved in getting a product or service out the door in order to generate revenue for the business. In a small business, you are likely to be involved in both.

In a small business, the office manager may also provide the services of human resources. You may be responsible for coordinating employee benefits, creating personnel policies, furnishing training and development, conducting performance appraisals, and providing career development. You may also have to handle personnel and performance problems.

Regardless of whether you are running the office in a small business or supervising a department in a large business, the supervisor is usually responsible for making sure the employees follow the organization's policies and procedures for things like vacation time, sick time, leaves, and overtime. You may also have responsibilities of hiring, firing, and promotions.

Supervisors must review the career needs of the employees and the staffing needs of the organization. Supervisors are often the first to recognize the need for a new position, and they may open a new role by getting authorization from management. This will likely require communication in order to justify the new role. The supervisor could then be involved in advertising for job candidates, reviewing résumés, and conducting interviews. You may recommend candidates for a job, then handle all the new hire paperwork if the candidate is hired, including benefits, payroll, and tax forms. Finally, your job may involve making sure the new employee has the necessary workspace, office equipment, and supplies.

A supervisor will likely make sure that new employees get an orientation about the business, including the personnel policies, facilities, and work schedule. You may develop a training plan with the employees to make sure they have the skills needed for the job. At various times throughout the year, you may provide ongoing guidance in the form of coaching and counseling. The goal here is to help the employees take responsibility for their own development and to assist them when they need company approval to take classes or take time away from work for training.

Employee performance management may be a responsibility for an office manager or supervisor. The supervisor maintains job descriptions with responsibilities and qualifications for each position. The supervisor sets the performance standards for each job role and ensures that employees have appropriate and realistic goals. Throughout the year, they give the employees feedback on their performance. Performance reviews are then conducted throughout the year to assess how the employees have performed and what they can do to make improvement.

A good supervisor is also a good coach. Coaching involves working with employees to create realistic goals, action plans, and time lines. The supervisor provides ongoing guidance as the employees work toward their goals. There are five aspects of goal setting that can best be remembered by using the acronym SMART:

S—Specific

M—Measurable

A—Attainable

R—Realistic

T—Timely

A good coach also acts like a mentor to the employee. Since a supervisor will likely understand the organization better than the employee, the supervisor can serve as a mentor offering advice about the job and career. The employee can look to the supervisor as a role model.

Since the supervisor is the first person to share news about new policies and programs, the supervisor must be an advocate for the organization. Employees get confused and fearful whenever change is involved; however, in the rapidly changing business world, change is inevitable. The supervisor must be a supporter of the organization's change initiatives to help reduce the anxiety. You must be authentic in how you present your feelings about new programs and organization change, yet tactful in how you present it.

At the same time, a supervisor must also be an advocate for employees and represent employee requests to management. For example, if an employee deserves a promotion, the supervisor must often justify the reason to management.

It's not unusual for a supervisor to be seen by employees as being one of them and a part of management at the same time. It's a unique combination that has both pluses and negatives.

Building Trust with Your Team

Trust is important to the relationship between a supervisor and an employee. Teams that trust each other are more productive and have fewer personnel issues. With trust, you learn to depend on each other. There's really no substitute for trust; your team either has it or it doesn't.

Trusting the people on your team means that your employees are willing to take your word for it when you tell them they need to do something they don't really want to do. Trust means you're willing to be influenced. Trust elevates performance because team members are willing to do things without debate.

A conversation is a relationship. Each person influences the other. A supervisor can't build trust with employees without being able to listen. In addition, you must share important information about yourself. You must be vulnerable in order to build trust. There must be a certain amount of interdependence in order to build trust. We must depend on others and they must depend on us. Fulfilling your promises and being fair helps build trust.

Acceptance is the key to trust, so avoid office humor that belittles people. Avoid putdowns or conversations that show disrespect. Trust is built over time as it is used. Disrespect erodes the trust that has been established.

Some people are more likely to trust than others. It depends on their history of experience. It also depends on their character in general. If they've learned not to trust people in the past, or they can't even trust themselves, then they will not trust you either.

Key aspects of trust include the following:

- Ability—Has knowledge skills and competencies, so that the person performs in a way that meets your expectations
- Integrity—Maintains accepted behavior based on past actions, credibility of communications, and fairness
- Benevolence—Is concerned about the welfare of others; would like to advance others or not impede them
- Open communication—Shares control and delegates decisions

Ethics in Business

Ethics as it relates to business involves the principles and moral problems that an individual or an organization follows in the course of conducting business. Competition between companies and even among coworkers can lead to unethical decisions. Fear of losing a job or a client, or the drive to succeed at any cost, often results in unethical corporate practices. It has several facets, as explored below.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Business ethics overlaps with business philosophy. While some businesses still focus solely on the financial return to shareholders or owners, many have expanded their focus to include corporate responsibilities to the rights and interests of everyone else.

Corporate outreach programs that involve volunteering and donations often benefit the company with positive public relations. These programs also enrich the lives of employees who get involved, help improve morale, and assist other people and organizations that are in need.

Decision-Making Styles

There are several different decision-making styles that you may encounter throughout your career that go to the heart of business ethics, although there are parallels to what we all consider acceptable societal behavior. One type is the person who makes decisions based on his or her personal needs and fears while ignoring the needs of others. Another type is the person primarily concerned for others and for what will benefit everyone. A third type is the person concerned with current situations and logic, without concern for him or herself or other people. The fourth type is the person who is driven by principles and rules.

Typical Ethical Issues in Business

Some of the most common business ethics issues that appear in the news from time to time include creative accounting practices, insider trading, securities fraud, excessive executive compensation, bribery, and kickbacks.

Many ethical issues involve human resource management in such areas as recruitment, hiring, performance management, training and development, union relations, and safety. Perhaps the most important of these is safety, since safety is some-times weighed against profit when making decisions. A variety of workplace laws have been enacted to help ensure fairness in human resource–related activities. A summary of these laws is included later in this chapter.

Ethics in sales and marketing involves being responsible to consumers. For example, it is unethical to target vulnerable sections of the population for consumption of unnecessary or dangerous products and services. There are currently laws that attempt to control ethical matters in sales and marketing, such as product labeling, health and safety warnings, and financial risk.

Other related areas where unethical behavior is sometimes demonstrated include price fixing, price discrimination, anti-competitive practices, bait and switch, email spam, attack ads, and pyramid schemes. Ethics in property rights involves such matters as theft of copyright, illegal software and music copying, real estate property rights, patent infringement, and trademark infringement.

Company Policies on Ethical Behavior

Many companies have created policies that govern the ethical conduct of employees. These policies detail what is expected from workers and offer guidance on ethical decision making. Ideally, implementing these policies will help companies avoid future lawsuits.

These policies are written documents that are supported and monitored by top management. They explain what conduct is sanctioned and state the consequences for failure to adhere to the rules. Additionally, some companies have appointed compliance or business conduct officers whose job is to search for instances of fraud, corruption, and abuse. These officers report to the CEO and are responsible for assessing the ethical nature of the company’s activities and making recommendations.

Conflict Management

Another aspect of being an office manager or supervisor is handling conflict management. Conflict occurs when two or more values, perspectives, or opinions are opposite in nature. You may experience personal conflict when you don’t live up to your own values. You experience conflict with someone else when your values or points of view are threatened. You may experience conflict because of fear of the unknown or a lack of fulfillment. Conflict is inevitable and is a natural phase in the team-building process. When you have a diversity of ideas, it often leads to contradictory opinions.

Conflict often helps raise important issues. It causes us to work on the most important questions and it motivates people to participate in solving problems. Conflict management helps people learn to recognize differences in opinion and to learn from those differences. Therefore, conflict isn't the problem. The problem is when conflict is managed poorly. When this happens, conflict hampers productivity, lowers employee morale, mushrooms into larger conflicts, and causes people to react inappropriately.

A supervisor can cause workplace conflict by communicating poorly with employees. If employees are constantly surprised by new programs and policies without having their supervisor explain the situation, the employees don't understand the reasons for the decisions and feel left out of the process and disrespected. As a result, people will resort to getting information from the rumor mill.

Conflict can be caused by poor leadership, such as when a manager or supervisor passes the buck rather than dealing with issues head on. If decisions are inconsistent, uniformed, or completely missing, conflict is evitable.

Workplace conflict can also occur when there are not enough resources to go around or there is a disagreement about who does what. Conflict can occur because of personal chemistry between coworkers or between managers and employees. Strong personalities may clash. Opposite opinions may collide.

Minimizing Conflicts

There are several things you can do to minimize conflict at work. Start by reviewing the job descriptions of your team. Set up meetings with your employees and discuss the job descriptions together. Are they still accurate? Do they need to be revised? Make sure that the job roles for your team don't conflict with one another.

Take time to build relationships with each of your employees. Meet with them one-on-one at least once a month. Talk about accomplishments and any problems. You should also hold regular management meetings with your entire team to discuss initiatives and the status of major projects. Ask your team to provide regular status reports and include accomplishments, current issues, needs from management, and plans for the upcoming period.

You can minimize conflict by training your team on conflict management, delegation skills, and interpersonal communications.

Document the procedures and processes in your department so employees have job aids that describe how to perform routine tasks. Have the employees write the procedures when possible. Distribute the procedures to your team and train the team, so that team members can back each other up for business continuity purposes.

Difficult People

One unpleasant part of being an office manager or supervisor is that from time to time you have to work with difficult people. Difficult people are unhappy people. They are working for the negative side of their personality. They don't intentionally wake up each morning and decide to be difficult. They are often unaware of themselves and how their attitude affects others. They don't realize how their attitude is harmful to the team and to their own careers. As a supervisor, you will constantly be faced with situations where people challenge your decisions and make it difficult to get things done. It's important to be able to understand other people's viewpoints and why they act a certain way.

One well-recognized trait, especially with technical people, is the know-it-all. This trait is often seen with computer programmers, software developers, engineers, doctors, and attorneys. You might ask a know-it-all a simple question and get the response, "How dare you question me." Or, you might make a suggestion for how to do a task and get a multitude of reasons your idea won't work. Eventually, you give up trying to work with the know-it-all.

This trait is a manifestation of arrogance. People act arrogantly to avoid feeling vulnerable or insecure. They are afraid of being seen as unworthy or incompetent, so they throw up a defensive shield of arrogance. The result of this behavior is that people refuse to work with them, no one believes what they say, people don't think they really know what they're doing, and they lose credibility and respect.

Another common trait of difficult people is the my-way-or-the-highway attitude. This trait seems prevalent in management positions. No matter what anyone else thinks, these people force their ideas on everyone. There is no open discussion about issues. Things must be done the way these people want or else. As an example, if you were in a meeting with this type of person and offered a suggestion, the my-way-or-the-highway person would make it clear your suggestions were not wanted. Eventually, no one wants to contribute, and the added value that comes from having a diversity of ideas is lost.

This trait is an aspect of dominance. Working with this type of person is like living under a dictatorship. When you combine dominance with power, this person becomes king of the planet. The positive side of dominance is leadership, though. When such people focus on the positive side of their personality, they can be effective and charming. But if these people come under stress, they quickly jump to the dark side.

The result of become domineering is that the team refuses to interact with these individuals. People won't tell them the truth or provide them with enough information that might help them make better decisions. People try to ignore the domineering characters and avoid implementing their ideas.

How to Handle Difficult People

When you are working with people who go into attack mode or becomes extremely defensive, don't try to argue with them. These people are very insecure and the more you push, the worse it will get. Since these people are probably under stress, wait until another time to pursue the discussion. If they

are always this way, the only alternative is to find someone else with whom to work. Keep your self-confidence and don't allow yourself to be attacked verbally. If your boss is one of these difficult people, it's probably time to find another job.

When supervising difficult people, try to help them see how their behavior is damaging their career. Set goals that help them learn to work better with others, and monitor their behavior closely to see if it improves. If their attitude doesn't improve, you'll have to terminate their employment.

If you find that you are becoming a difficult person yourself, learn to recognize the signs. Try not to react so quickly, and realize that you are not being attacked personally. Learn to listen when someone else asks a question or makes a suggestion. Repeat what someone has said to confirm that you understand. Ask the person to restate the question or comment if you are still unclear about what was intended. Take some time before you respond. This will help reduce the stress, so you can make a decision without feeling under pressure.

Realize that other people have good ideas that are just as valid as your own. Look for courses or workshops that teach listening skills or team building. Look for someone in the organization who can help you work on the situation. Ask him or her to let you know when you're being a jerk, to call your attention to your behavior. You have to realize that this learned behavior may take years to overcome, but don't give up on yourself.

As you prepare to work with difficult people on the job, you should do the following:

- Confront difficult people face-to-face and by yourself.
- Write down the issue that needs to be handled and your goal for the outcome of your conversation.
- Write down a list of points you need to make to support your goal.
- Write down the objections or reactions the other person may have to your view.
- Organize your notes and gather supportive documents and evidence.
- Arrange a meeting in a private place where you will not be disturbed.
- Hold the meeting and share your view.
- Stay on target by describing your points.
- Listen to the other person's side.

Communicate and be persistent.

The more frequently you confront and deal directly with difficult people, the easier it becomes. The amount of time it takes to prepare for these types of meetings will decrease. The result is that you will become stronger and tougher.

When you confront and handle these types of situations, people will respect you for your courage and control. Taking positive action in the face of fear is an important trait shared by successful people.

Workplace Law

There are a wide variety of workplace laws that govern the relationship between businesses and employees. Many of these laws were enacted to help prevent employer abuse of employees and to control working conditions. Workplace laws vary from state to state, so it is important that you consult the Department of Labor website for your state in order to familiarize yourself with what the legal requirements are for your business and your employer.

Industrial Home Work

Many states have laws on the books that control manufacturing activities in the home. A company may not require workers to take home components for assembly of products or to repair company equipment unless a special permit has been approved. When a permit has been received, workers must be paid the same wage as that paid in the factory or other place of business. One of the key elements in getting approval for industrial home work involves the safety of employees and whether dangerous equipment or substances are used in the manufacturing process.

Smoking in the Workplace

Some states have anti-smoking laws that prohibit smoking in the workplace. These laws pertain to smoking in a business location, such as an office building or factory. Most of these laws do not restrict smoking outside in public areas, such as an exterior break area, loading dock, or grounds. Anti-smoking laws also protect employees who assist in the supervision or enforcement of these laws from retaliation by the employer.

Some companies have extended their anti-smoking policies to include no smoking in company vehicles, as well as outdoor smoking on their campuses.

Regarding smoking at home outside of the workplace, most states have laws that say that an employer may not require an employee to refrain from smoking or using tobacco products as a condition for employment. An employer may not discriminate against smokers in regards to hiring practices or compensation.

Breastfeeding in the Workplace

Some states have laws that allow mothers to breastfeed or pump breast milk during a meal or break period. Employers are supposed to provide a room near the work area where the employee can produce milk in private. Employers are prevented from discriminating against or taking any disciplinary action against employees who exercise this right.

Electronic Surveillance

While employers may have electronic surveillance systems that involve video and audio monitoring of employee activities, there are laws that prevent electronic monitoring in break rooms, locker rooms, rest rooms, and lounges. In addition, electronic monitoring is prohibited during employment contract negotiations between managers and employees.

Employers who do engage in electronic monitoring of employee activities must inform employees in writing. This includes direct observation as well as monitoring of computers and telephones. Whenever an employer has reasonable grounds to suspect that an employee may be engaged in illegal conduct, then the employer may monitor the employee's activities without providing written notice.

Polygraph Testing

Many states have laws that prevent employers from requiring polygraph testing as a condition for employment or require a current employee to take a polygraph examination in order to continue employment. Employers may not dismiss or discipline an employee who voluntarily takes a polygraph test and fails the test.

Criminal Records

Employer inquiries about erased criminal records are prohibited. An employer may not ask about whether someone was arrested or charged if the records have been erased. This applies mainly to youthful offenders whose criminal records are erased when they become an adult, as well as people who have a criminal charge dismissed, are charged of a criminal offense but not convicted, or who are pardoned.

Whistleblowing

Employees who disclose illegal activities or unethical practices in the workplace are protected from retaliation from their employers. This not only applies to employees who report misconduct but also those who are required to testify as part of an investigation into corporate behavior on behalf of a state or federal agency. Regardless of what an employee discloses or reports, an employer may not fire, discipline, or otherwise penalize the employee.

Plant Closing Laws

Whenever a business must close a location, the business must continue to provide health insurance coverage for a certain period of time, which varies by state.

Drug Testing

Drug testing is allowed as a condition for employment if the employer provides written notice of the requirement at the time of the employment application. The results of any drug test must be kept confidential and should not be disclosed to any person other than the person tested.

Drug testing is also allowed for current employees if the employer has a reasonable suspicion that the employee is under the influence of drugs or alcohol, which would adversely affect job performance or threaten safety. Employers are not allowed to directly observe an employee in the process of providing a urine sample.

If an employee or applicant tests positive for drugs or alcohol, the employer must allow for a second test which is separate and independent from the first. If an employee tests positive twice, then the employer may terminate an employee, deny promotions or raises, or take other disciplinary action.

Meal Periods

Generally, most state workplace laws require that employees be given a meal period at some point within an eight-hour workday. Meal periods are generally 30 minutes and are required to be given sometime after the first two hours of work or before the last two hours of work.

Blacklisting

It is illegal to publish the name of any employee for the purpose of preventing the person from securing employment.

Emergency Phone Calls

Employers must inform employees of any phone call where the caller states that there is an emergency that involves members of the employee's family. All reasonable efforts must be made to notify the employee of the emergency phone call.

Family and Medical Leave

The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) entitles eligible employees to take unpaid, job-protected leave for specific family and medical reasons. Employers must continue to provide group health insurance coverage under the same terms and conditions as if the employee had not taken a leave.

Eligible employees are entitled to take a leave of up to twelve workweeks within a 12-month period for the following:

- Birth of a child and the care for the newborn child within one year of birth.
- Adoption of a newly placed child or foster care of a newly placed child within one year of the placement.
- Care of the employee's spouse, child, or parent who has a serious medical condition.
- Serious health condition that makes the employee unable to perform the essential functions of his or her job.
- Issues related to the employee's spouse, son, daughter, or parent who is a member of the military engaged in active duty.

Personnel File Laws

Employees may submit a written request to their employer for access and inspection of any personnel files, if such files exist. The inspection of the files must be made during regular business hours at the place of employment. Each employer who has personnel files should keep such files for at least one year after the termination of an employee.

Cancellation of Benefits

Any employer who provides group life insurance or health insurance and decides to discontinue offering the benefit must send a written notice to employees not less than fifteen days preceding the effective date of the cancellation.

Work Schedule

Some states have laws that limit the number of work days within the calendar week. In most cases, the limitation for a work schedule is no more than six days per week. Employees who observe a religious day each week may not be dismissed for refusing to work that day.

Further Reading:

- ✓ Senge, Peter. *The Fifth Discipline*. Currency, 2006.
- ✓ Stack, Laura. *Leave the Office Earlier*. Broadway Books, 2004.
- ✓ Tracy, Brian. *Eat That Frog!* Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2007.