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## THE SUPERVISOR'S KEY ROLE IN FAIR EMPLOYMENT

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Corporate commitment to fair employment practices has been with us for several years now; in most organizations the ink has long since dried on policy statements from the chief executive, and personnel managers' special recruiting programs are paying off in a steadily increasing minority-group population in the workforce. With recruiting under control, the next major step is development of newly hired minority employees, and most of this responsibility lies in the bailiwick of those who supervise. The personnel department may have initiated the recruiting effort, but now the first-line supervisor must carry on the important job of development. Personnel can help in planning and conducting classroom training, but the real training work will be done on the job.

The new group of employees, with unfamiliar educational and work backgrounds, gives supervisors a responsibility for which they may not be prepared even by years of experience, yet a program of training and integrating the disadvantaged into the workforce cannot succeed if supervisors do not have the attitudes, skills, and understanding to handle the special problems that many of the disadvantaged present.

### WHAT IS "NORMAL"?

For example, most white-collar supervisors are used to working with people who keep their personal and business lives quite separate, the one not interfering with the other except in unusual circum-

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stances. However, this familiar norm may not be familiar at all to newcomers in the regular workforce who have not yet learned that a sick mother, a traffic court appearance, or a headache is not an adequate reason for missing a day of work without at least calling in to report absence.

Problems of attendance and tardiness are usually the first ones the supervisor has to deal with in the case of disadvantaged employees, and unless he gives these problems a second thought, he will assume from past experience that employees who are frequently late or absent are unreliable or really don't want to work in the first place. Supervisors will have to question their own conventional attitudes if they are to build and maintain a culturally integrated work team, but this is asking for quite a lot, considering the demands of day-to-day obligations.

#### THE STANDARDS DILEMMA

Chief among the day-to-day obligations is maintaining standards. Supervisors are judged on the quality and quantity of their group output, and therefore employee behavior that jeopardizes group performance is of real concern. Employees who appear not to be carrying their weight are a threat, but, on the other hand, so are standards adjusted to accommodate such employees.

In these circumstances, it is not enough for upper and middle managers to write policy memos simply saying that more minority people must be hired; these policy statements must be accompanied by some sort of guidance, so that supervisors know how flexible they can be with hiring and performance standards. And the guidance cannot be in terms of "Yes, you can lower standards" or "No, you can't." The answer lies somewhere between--and supervisors should have their say--in a policy something like this:

Our objective is to turn out the very best work possible. This does not mean that every individual in a group performs at the same high level; as always, every group will have members with strengths and weaknesses. Each supervisor will be responsible

for a balance of talents within his group that will produce a marketable product at reasonable cost.

Even though this policy guidance is pretty broad, it will give the supervisor more confidence in handling group problems that stem from disparity of individual talents.

#### SUPPORT FROM ABOVE

Besides verbal recognition of the need for a more flexible stance on standards, management will have to provide evidence that it understands the problems supervisors face and appreciates the efforts of those who tackle these problems successfully. Management may have to spell out its awareness that perhaps past standards were unrealistic and unchallenged because there never was any reason to question them. Furthermore, management must make it clear that it knows new problems are not necessarily a sign of supervisory failure; that training and coaching will take more of the supervisor's time; and that calculated risks are necessary to the success of any endeavor, including fair employment.

The pat on the back for supervisors who use this guidance successfully can be expressed simply as an appreciative word when a salary increase is given or, for wider exposure, an article in the employee publication may feature both supervisor and minority employees. (Many write-ups now make a point of the new minority worker's success story but fail to acknowledge the help of his supervisor.)

If the company has a formalized performance appraisal system for supervisors, progress in handling minority employment problems should certainly be included in rating criteria. If the system is based on management by objectives, each supervisor can set his own targets in the area of fair employment; in any case, during performance review sessions, discussion of fair employment practices will help make it clear that each supervisor is accountable for his group's observing them.

It is quite likely that some supervisors have no interest one way or the other in fair employment, and some may even be dragging

their feet. The easy way out as far as these men are concerned is to bypass them in the fair employment program, if there are enough other committed supervisors to carry it forward, but the roadblocks they set up will have to be removed sooner or later. If legal, moral, or economic persuasion has no effect on the uncooperative supervisors, then other formal and personalized communication will be necessary via the performance appraisal system. They must clearly be told that their own future depends in part on their effort to hire and develop disadvantaged people. This approach is tough-minded, but it concerns a tough problem that calls for straight talk from management, and the performance review is an appropriate occasion for it.

#### SPECIALISTS A PLUS

Many companies by now have minority employment specialists on their personnel department staffs. If the size of the company or division does not justify hiring such a specialist from the minority community, valuable aid can be provided by a qualified outside consultant on a part-time basis.

The first assignment for a minority specialist on the personnel staff will probably be in recruiting and counseling minority employees, but he should also be available as a counselor for the supervisor who must work with these employees. The counseling may range from giving technical advice to helping the supervisor who is biased about race relations to cope with his own difficulties.

Aside from recruiting and counseling services, there are other sound reasons for having a minority specialist on the personnel staff. As the racial and cultural composition of the workforce changes, so should the personnel staff, to ensure that the personnel effort is in step with what is going on in the company. The personnel manager who wakes up one day faced with new, militant union demands or serious discrimination charges may have asked for trouble by not keeping in touch with the changing population of his organization.

REAL SITUATIONS, NOT THEORY

Of course, all the good intentions in the world are meaningless unless they are expressed in action, and action usually depends on the effectiveness of management-supervisory communications. A supervisory training program is an obvious place to launch and carry on a dialogue about fair employment problems, but if there is no formal program, it is relatively simple to set up special seminars in which supervisors can talk about fair employment problems with higher-level managers.

These discussions are often most productive when they center on case studies of actual situations within the company. Here is a sample of such a case:

You are Harriett McHale, supervisor of a clerical service, and your problem is Matt Ferris, one of six people working for you and the first black to join your group. He is capable and can be charming, but his aggressiveness rubs some people the wrong way. You have heard that he recently encouraged a black employee in another department to bring charges of discrimination against the company and that he has also tried to organize blacks "to discuss their problems at the company." His work is satisfactory, but you have had many complaints about his behavior from people higher up, as well as from within your own group. What, if anything, should you do about this situation?

This vignette lacks the detail necessary for discussion in depth, but it does illustrate the kind of problems management should consider with supervisors. Interwoven with specific consideration of the question, "How would you handle this case as a supervisor?" should be discussion of basic company policy on matters of work standards and performance appraisal. Throughout, management should show that it understands the complexity of problems supervisors face in dealing with minority group employees.

Ideally, supervisors from minority groups should be included in the supervisory-management seminars, and, of course, the minority employment specialist should be on hand especially if he is skilled in discussion groups.

It is not enough, and not even correct, to say, "Treat all employees the same, regardless of their color." The disadvantaged black man with job-related adjustments to make must be given different consideration from that given a middleclass white man with the same problem. To tell supervisors otherwise is not much more helpful than telling them to practice the golden rule.

To summarize, the first-line supervisor is the key man in the continued success of any company's fair employment program; the personnel department can initiate and audit programs, but it cannot make them work. These new responsibilities tighten the first-line supervisor's traditional man-in-the-middle vise, so, with these added pressures, he has every right to a conscious and continuing assist from management beyond mere policy directives.