

Employee Relations... Everybody Talks About It

By Mike White, Omni HR Systems Direct

Frequently, when the subject of employee relations comes up, I am reminded of that old saying about the weather. You know the one. Everybody talks about the weather, but no one does anything about it. The same thing can be said about employee relations programs. A lot of people talk about its importance, but are we really doing enough to encourage positive employee relations?

Companies that do a poor job of managing employee relations face the potential for serious problems. Employees who feel their complaints or concerns are not being addressed may turn outside the company for help.

An employee that believes his/her concern was not handled properly can easily file a complaint with any of the local, state or federal agencies charged with administering the various employment or labor laws. Or, the employee can behave in a way that adversely affects company operations. Absenteeism, tardiness and high turnover rates are all symptomatic of poor employee relations. In either case, the results can be expensive for an organization. There are hard costs such as legal fees, fines and penalties and soft costs like lower productivity and low employee morale.

Some employers believe that a good employee relations program consists of feel good items such as employee of the month awards, an annual picnic or a holiday party, and/or passing out tee shirts to employees. These items have a place in a complete employee relations program, but if this is your entire program more needs to be done.

The key word in employee relations is relations, or more correctly – relationships. Employers and employees need to build a relationship and it needs to be built on trust, mutual respect, communica-

tions, fair and ethical behavior, and finally a genuine concern for the other individual. A relationship does not just happen, it takes time and hard work to develop and perpetuate. The good news is that the reward can easily exceed the hard work. Positive relationships enable people and organizations to accomplish things that could not otherwise be achieved.

The following are some of the elements that should be incorporated into an effective employee relations program.

Develop written policies and procedures explaining the rules of the organization. Most employees will follow rules if they are concise and reasonable. At the same time make it clear that the company will not tolerate abusive, discriminatory or harassing behavior on the part of any individual. Lay out a clear policy for handling complaints including the steps employees should take to resolve the matter.

Recruit and promote individuals who recognize and demonstrate the importance of positive employee relations. Potential applicants should be able to demonstrate that they have good communication and people skills. Take the next step and make employee relations an element in each supervisor's/manager's annual evaluation.

Train supervisors/managers to develop good human relations skills. Many supervisors/managers concentrate on developing their technical skills rather than their people skills. They often have little or no formal training in human relations management. Develop a basic course to ensure that managers master this basic skill including a segment on critical supervisory skills. This would include the critical skills of hiring, performance evaluation, and coaching and counseling, and legal issues in the workplace.

Finally, and probably most importantly, good communications

is essential for an effective employee relations program. Keep in mind two points. First, communications is a two-way proposition, what is heard is just as important as what is said. Be sure to listen to comments from your employees. This feedback will indicate if the message sent is actually being received. Second, communicate often and use a variety of methods to open up the communication process. A regular company newsletter is a good idea, as are regular open meetings to discuss changes. An open meeting format may be intimidating to some so be sure to offer one-on-one sessions as well. Make sure that every new employee receives a full and complete orientation to the company within the first few days of employment. Every two years conduct an employee attitude survey and also conduct an exit interview whenever possible.

There is no magic formula to ensure good employee relations. It is something that must be addressed constantly. Good employee relations is not simply a work item for the human resources department, it is an integral component of the management process. Employee relations is the responsibility of every manager/supervisor and it should be included as a key job element in every job description. Maybe my analogy with the weather is not accurate. Unlike the weather, we can do a lot to improve our employee relations programs. What is the forecast at your company?

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Just Briefly...

- Congratulations to **Jerry Collins, Flaherty & Collins**, on being named the **Sales-On-Site** Apartment Industry Hero for 2002. During the 2002 Midwest Multi-Family Exposition & Education Conference an overwhelming number of nominations for Collins were received at the Sales On Site booth citing his heroic efforts for residents and staff following the September 2002 tornados.

- **For Rent Magazine** has announced an agreement with Regal Entertainment Group and Trader Distribution Services to expand distribution to over 300 movie theaters operating under the banner of Regal Cinema, United Artists and Edwards Theaters.



Jerry Collins accepts the 2002 Apartment Industry Hero award from Holly Postlewaite (left) and Nikki Lorah (right) of Sales-On-Site.