Relax...

It's Only a Grievance!

A guide for the new supervisor to help you SURVIVE or even AVOID a grievance filed against you.
Congratulations! If you are reading this, the chances are good you were recently promoted to a supervisory position. Waiting for you is a world of challenges and opportunities. Often, a new supervisor is faced with unfamiliar situations affecting employees, and it's quite natural to be concerned about the consequences of a course of action.

The members of the Family Support Services Division's Experienced Supervisor Academy Number 22 recognized the plight of the new supervisor and prepared this guide to the OKDHS Grievance Process especially for them. This handbook is full of useful information and tips that both the new and the experienced supervisor can use to feel better about a sometimes-troubling process.

We gratefully acknowledge the hard work and insight of the following Experienced Supervisor Academy Number 22 members for their effort in making this handbook a reality. Thank you, to Nelson Bewley, John Johnson, Jill Kinney, Paulette Nelson, Carol Rohrbaugh, Mona Wheeler, and Jerome White.

We recommend that you take the opportunity to become familiar with this booklet and the Employee Grievance Handbook, OKDHS Pub. No. 04-06, as you prepare yourself for one of the challenges of the road ahead.

Scott Lange
OKDHS Grievance Manager

Roger A. Scott
Assistant OKDHS Grievance Manager
First Things First:

What this is NOT:
- NOT a replacement for OKDHS policy and procedure.
- NOT a magic spell to ensure you never have a grievance filed against you.

Who You Gonna Call?

The experts in this area are there to help, and technical assistance is a part of their job duties:

Scott Lange  
OKDHS Grievance Manager  
405-522-2098

Roger Scott  
Assistant OKDHS Grievance Manager  
405-522-0992

Mailing Address:

OKDHS Grievance Manager  
HRMD  
P.O. Box 25352  
Oklahoma City, OK 73125
What Every New Supervisor Needs to Know

- Effective communication and negotiation skills to use with all staff.
- How to avoid common "first" mistakes.
- Proven tips and advice the supervisor can use to help resolve work place disputes informally.
- Ways to limit or prevent mistakes to decrease liability.
- Strategies to reduce personal stress.

Preventing Problems – How to be "Pro-Active"

We all want to be "good" supervisors, and to supervise staff who are efficient, effective and productive. Many of us may strive to be the supervisor we wished we had when we were entry-level staff. Thus, we find ourselves surprised by employees who react with distrust or suspicion to our best ideas.

"Where did we go wrong?" we wail.

- Understand that people are different.
- Your idea of a "great" supervisor may be your staff's idea of the "worst" supervisor.
You can't control the experiences your staff have had that shaped their idea of what a good supervisor is; nor can you control the different types of personalities you may have to work with in order to complete your own tasks successfully.

While a promotion to supervisor presents you with new opportunities, it will present new challenges, as well. For example:

✓ Supervising employees who competed for the same promotion you received.

✓ Inheriting "problem employees".

✓ Supervising employees who are highly rigid and resistant to change.

✓ Supervising employees who are burned out and mistrustful of all management decisions.

✓ Supervising staff with "short timer" attitudes.

No matter how good or insightful you are, you will not always be able to see where a grievance is "brewing".

This booklet will help you identify costly assumptions that can seriously impact morale. Use it as a guide to walk you through everything you need to know.
Grievance Prevention Techniques

1. If communication is good, more communication is better. Begin to build bridges to the staff you supervise. Take the time to greet them each day. Learn as much as you can about who they are and what is important to them.

2. Remember that change is as stressful for your staff as it is for you (and even "good" change is stressful).
3. Even if you (and your staff) know that change is inevitable, allow yourself (and them) a period of adjustment to the change. Give yourself time to see, and for them to show you what things genuinely need to be changed. Don't throw the baby out with the bath water.

4. Keep in mind your actions will always speak louder than your words. If you make a promise to your staff, make sure you do your best to deliver. If, for any reason, you can't deliver (you tried and were overruled by those above), level with your staff about why.

5. Remember the more your management style differs from your predecessors, the more time your staff may need to adjust and the rockier the adjustment period may be.
6. Make yourself available to your staff to get to know you. Schedule times staff may meet with you individually if you feel that is what is called for; or build in times when your "door is open" should staff need or want to come in to "chat". Set up events to allow this to happen, also: if your unit's regular staff meetings are monthly, you may want to increase their frequency during a time of change. Or if the workload doesn't justify that, schedule unit training that all can attend together, or just the occasional snack day.

When Trouble Starts

Learn to distinguish between complaints that can be resolved easily, or locally, and those that need to move through more formal channels.

Attempt to resolve all disputes informally first.

Those that can't be resolved informally need to be passed on to final decision makers as fast as possible.
When a Grievance is Filed!

Yikes!! It's finally happened. Despite all your best efforts at listening to staff, representing their concerns to management, and after hours of coaching and encouraging, you've got an employee who wouldn't correct some bad behavior and you had to take corrective action.

Now that employee is HOPPING MAD and AFTER YOU!!!

✓ Breathe! Don't Panic! Relax! It's not the end of the world. It's not even the end of your career.

✓ Don't overreact!

✓ Don't take it personally. This is perhaps the hardest advice to take. You have worked very hard to be the best supervisor you can, and your reward is that employee you have spent the most time with is now saying things like:

"My supervisor doesn't like me. She was hired to get rid of me."

"My supervisor didn't train me, and now expects me to have learned this new procedure and be fully performing."

"My supervisor gave me corrective discipline just because he is biased and has discriminated against me."
Reassure yourself with the fact that just because an employee makes an allegation that does not make it true. If you react to the allegation, you lend some credence to it, even if unintentionally.

And if an employee takes the grievance all the way to an appeal at the Merit Protection Commission, an inappropriate reaction by you to their allegations could result in a decision undoing all the hard work you put into holding the employee accountable in the first place.

✓ Responding to an employee's grievance, especially when they have attacked your decision, action, or management style is stressful. You need to seek ways to blow off steam and relax. Taking the time to actively schedule down time or "venting" time can reduce your chances of acquiring stress related illnesses in the future. A word about venting: If you must, we recommend you do so to a counselor or pastor who is obligated to keep your confidentiality. You do NOT want something you said to a friend getting back to the workplace.
✓ Take the time to review the employee's grievance thoroughly. Notify your immediate and reviewing supervisor. Read relevant policies/guidelines: Employee Grievance Handbook, OKDHS Publication 04-06, and the policy relevant to the issue being grieved. Remember it is also your responsibility to ensure the employee has either a copy of the grievance policy, DHS:2-1-150 through 163, or access to the online policy. The policy should be given to all new employees and re-issued any time the supervisor has to issue corrective discipline.

You may think you don't have time to spend reading policy, but believe us, you don't have time NOT to. You really NEED to have this information fresh in your mind.

✓ Don't stop trying to build bridges to the employee. By keeping the lines of communication open, you increase the likelihood that the grievance will not turn personal. If you were in the habit of greeting the employee cordially every morning before the grievance was filed, continue that habit afterwards. Remember, the habits of polite, cordial and concerned respect will go a long way towards helping you find a way to settle the grievance through informal negotiation or through mediation.
✔ Review the documentation that justified your action; for example, the statistics and other measurements that prove a performance evaluation was based on actual performance; records that show the standards used were applied to other staff with the same classification or job description; or personnel files that confirm that other staff who violated the same policies received the same or similar discipline.

✔ Be open to seeking advice from more experienced supervisors, county directors or administrators.

✔ Remember, no matter how much an employee feeds the rumor mill in the office with half-truths and gossip (not all employees do this, but some will) that is the employee’s option. Supervisors must be careful in responding to rumors and innuendo. It's always safe to say that you cannot respond as the employee has the right to privacy, even when the employee chooses not to exercise it.