# Handling Difficult Situations:
## Tips and Guidance for New Managers

**Part 7 in a 12-Part Series on Helping First-Time Managers and Seasoned, But Untrained, Supervisors Transition to Effective Leaders**

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## About the Supervisory Basics Article Series

The transition from an individual contributor to a supervisory or managerial role is one of the most critical and difficult career moves.

Representing the largest pool of management talent in most companies, supervisors prove critical to an organization's success. Companies that develop superior leaders in these supervisory positions can execute more effectively than their competition.

This article, *Handling Difficult Situations: Tips and Guidance for New Managers,* is based on Module #7 from The Supervisory Basics Series, a 12-Part Series on Helping Individual Contributors and Seasoned, But Untrained, Supervisors Transition to Effective Leaders.

The Supervisory Basics Series consists of 12 individual yet linked two-hour modules, delivered in leader-led or eLearning formats, helping managers understand the management behaviors and tactics required to ensure their own and their company's success. More information on The Supervisory Basics Series can be found at the conclusion of this article.

Listen to the Supervisory Basics Podcast Series: *Tips for Managers and HR Professionals on Helping Individual Contributors Transition to Effective Leaders.* Available on iTunes.

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## Introduction

Not all situations that come before the new manager will be easy to deal with. A main responsibility and obligation in a managerial capacity is to address and, many times, confront difficult and uncomfortable issues.

This article offers insights into the important skills necessary for handling workplace complaints, employee conflicts, and personal requests.

## Addressing Workplace Complaints

*What is important is to keep learning, to enjoy challenge, and to tolerate ambiguity. In the end there are no certain answers.*
*— Martina Horner, president, Radcliffe College*

As a new manager, addressing employee complaints can be tricky. Often, during the first few months on the job, the new manager will not have enough information to determine the validity of complaints and/or provide effective solutions to valid complaints. An effective early approach is to: 1) let the employee know they have been heard, 2) get their "reasoning" for the complaint, and 3) let them know it will be looked into.

This gives the new manager time to assess and separate the invalid gripes from the valid complaints, and to gather enough information to have an effective conversation about the issue.

Separating petty gripes from legitimate issues that hamper productivity is an important responsibility for managers. A good way to begin dealing with the complaint is to consider the following questions:

- Is the complaint valid? How will business results be affected if the complaint is considered?
- Can an adjustment be made to accommodate the worker without being unfair to and/or have negative effects on other employees?
- Is the complaint a legitimate complaint about the work area, or is the problem a result of personal issues or conditions relating only to the one who is complaining?
- Have recent changes been made that are causing the complaint? If so, was that change made with valid business reasons in mind? What are the other consequences – positive and negative – as a result of the recent change?

Simultaneously, the new manager needs to learn company rules and policies and understand the rationale behind them. Understanding the rationale is a key factor in effectively handling employee complaints, since the more a manager can relate the issue, policy or rule to business results, the more effective his/her response will be.

In the case where a manager does not agree with company policies or rules, the accepted approach is to avoid criticizing them in front of direct reports. As a member of management, it is the new manager's obligation to uphold the rules and be able to articulate the reasons for the policy.

The most **ineffective** responses to complaints regarding policy or rules are:

- Because I said so.
- It's just the policy.
- Rules are rules – there's nothing I can do about it.

*The new manager needs to set the tone by making cooperation ("playing well with others") a performance expectation.*

## Tactics for Handling Employee Conflicts

People who work closely together don't always get along. Being in close proximity and needing to cooperate to complete most work, employees often cannot simply ignore each other when they don't get along. It is inevitable that a new manager will be called upon to intervene when employees are in conflict with each other.

To mitigate these situations, the new manager needs to set the tone by making cooperation ("playing well with others") a performance expectation.

If direct intervention is necessary, talking to each person individually is the first step. When talking to the employees, the manager needs to avoid being drawn off the subject with side issues. If the side issue is valid, the manager needs to acknowledge it and deal with it at a later time. The second step is meeting with both parties. Have some options in mind before meeting with the co-workers in conflict. Advise them that their behavior is disruptive and corrective action may be necessary. Formal process is the next step. This entails laying out specific ground rules and ensuring clear, result-oriented performance expectations.

If individuals continue to not get along, if appropriate, try avoiding assigning work where the two parties will not have to work closely together, or adjusting their work locations so they aren't physically near each other.

Transferring an employee may be an appropriate solution if the employee is performing at an acceptable performance standard. Transferring an employee whose work is poor to another supervisor is not an effective tactic and sends poor messages to co-workers.

# Handling Personal Requests

*Nothing affects the credibility and integrity of a new manager more than recommendations for promotions or raises.*

**Promotions and Raises.** Nothing affects the credibility and integrity of a new manager more than recommendations for promotions or raises. Who gets promoted and who gets raises communicates clearly what the organization and supervisor values regarding employee performance and conduct.

In regard to raises, a new manager must prepare in order to be knowledgeable. Most importantly, the new manager must have a good understanding of a direct report's performance (see article 6: *Great Performance Review Skills*). Also, the new manager needs:

- Knowledge of local industry average pay scales.
- Knowledge of company policy regarding raises, merit increases, or bonuses.
- Specific criteria that must be met to earn a raise.
- A well-defined personal philosophy regarding raises, merit and performance.

In regard to promotions, the new manager needs to know and be able to articulate what performance characteristics and interpersonal factors would lead to a promotion recommendation.

**Time Off.** While vacation time can be planned for and illness is unavoidable, unscheduled requests for time off can be difficult to deal with. Issues to be considered when granting time off include:

- Company policy – the specifics.
- Precedents – What are you willing to live with – with this employee and other employees in the future?
- Productivity – What impact will your decision have on the job result of this employee and others?
- Past history – What is the history with this employee regarding time off from work?
- Urgency of need for time off – What is the nature of the request? Is it an emergency and something impossible to deal with at another time?

Respond appropriately, with considerations such as whether the employee is not following vacation policy, has no time on the books, prior requests by other co-workers that compete with the request, the employee has too many previous requests, a work-related need is urgent, or you are short-handed. If the employee continues to be insistent, put the burden back on him/her by noting that it is the employee's responsibility to give appropriate advance notice – excluding valid emergencies.

Effective managers don't want to be perceived as a soft touch but they also don't want to be perceived as unreasonable. Having a consistent rationale regarding time off policies is important.

# Conclusion

New managers have no honeymoon phase when it comes to learning their jobs. Difficult situations, such as handling workplace complaints, employee conflicts and personal requests, never take a break. Having the ability to handle difficult situations, articulate the reasons for policy and rules, and being clear on one's own personal stance on these issues, increases the new manager's credibility and predictability. Gaining the basic skills to address these situations is a prerequisite for becoming an effective supervisor.

In the next article (article eight of our 12-article series), Handling Performance Problems, a skill-based model for confronting and addressing direct report performance problem situations, will be discussed.

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If you enjoyed this article, please visit our website to access other articles in this 12-part series on Supervisory Basics.

## About the Supervisory Basics Series

The Supervisory Basics Series is based on extensive analysis of the competencies required of transitioning individual contributors and seasoned, but untrained, supervisors. This series provides the knowledge, tools and skills to immediately establish a leadership role and helps participants understand how to avoid the typical traps of new supervisors and managers.

The Supervisory Basics Series helps managers understand the management behaviors and tactics required to ensure their own and their company's success. The result is managers establishing themselves in a legitimate position of power, inspiring superior performance and promoting open, effective communication.

Supervisory Basics also helps beginning managers avoid common new manager traps—lack of clarity in expectations, ineffective communications, not establishing personal power and failing to move from "doer" to leader. Such negative behaviors lead to absenteeism, low morale, and lost productivity and customer loyalty, as well as increased attrition.

The series consists of 12 individual yet linked two-hour modules, delivered in leader-led or eLearning formats. Companies can choose flexible implementation, including an integrated 3-day series, stand-alone sessions, mix and match, and external facilitator or train-the-trainer options. Participants will learn to build credibility, establish legitimate position power, earn personal power, "manage up," understand legal basics and conduct purposeful workplace discussions. Download the brochure.

## About Impact Achievement Group

Impact Achievement Group is a training and performance management consulting company that provides assessments, coaching, story-based interactive workshops, and simulations for managers at all levels of organizations worldwide. Impact Achievement Group helps companies dramatically improve management and leadership competency for bottom-line results. Company experts Rick Tate and Julie White, Ph.D. are internationally recognized authorities in leadership development, human performance, customer-focused business strategies and workplace communications. Visit the website.