

**National Association of State Conservation Agencies
“Best Practices” Sharing Session for Field Staff
San Antonio, Texas
September 25-26, 2006**

Dealing With Employee Problems and Conflicts

**Lisa Knauf
District Services Director
Oklahoma Conservation Commission
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma**

**F. Dwain Phillips
Conservation District Liaison
Oklahoma Conservation Commission
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma**

Background: In Oklahoma, although there is a growing diversity in conservation district boards, there are still many rural areas where conservation district board members are farmers and ranchers. These board members usually don't have a lot of experience in managing and supervising employees. This lack of experience can also exist in some of the more urban boards also.

With volunteer board members, the challenge of managing and supervising employees is a big one, since some board members may only see the district employees at board meetings and special events. This can put the employees pretty well on their own when it comes to carrying out their jobs and dealing with other office staff members. While this system has worked for almost 70 years in Oklahoma, conflicts and problems with employee performance do occur.

Conflicts can be between district employees, district and NRCS or other agency personnel, district employees and customers, or district employees and the board members. Sometimes the conflict occurs because an employee is just not carrying out their job duties.

The District Services Division of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission often is requested to assist with such conflicts and other problems with employees.

Challenges in Helping Districts Resolve Conflicts:

1. Sometimes the conflict has been going on for some time. The longer the conflict, usually the more difficult it is to resolve.
2. Sometimes more than one employee is at fault and that may be an NRCS or other agency employee, which the district board has no authority over.
3. District boards often want to take immediate action (which is good except when that action is to immediately terminate an employee without following some very basic necessary steps)
4. Conflicts are not resolved in a day and district board members have to commit to following through with the process.
5. Sometimes the board, through the lack a good supervisory policy in place, hasn't gone through steps of performance reviews, documentation and discussion with employees about poor job performance or what is expected of them in relations with other staff. In these cases the board is not in control of the situation and makes it much more difficult for them to take immediate action.
6. And sometimes the conflict is between board members and it is keeping them from performing their duties.

Steps the OCC Uses in Assisting Districts Resolve Conflicts

1. Attend a board meeting at the invitation of the board. Meet with the board in an executive session to discuss the problem.
2. Help the board identify the key issues at hand. May require OCC employee meeting with individual board members and employees at a later time and then with the board again.
3. After the problem is clearly defined, provide the board with available options in handling the situation.
4. If needed, assist in the development of employee performance improvement plans, letters to employees or other agencies, position descriptions, standards of performance and district polices.
5. Assist district board in working with NRCS officials when problem involves NRCS employees.
6. Assist the district board with legal issues (If the problem is big enough the district may need to hire local attorney).

7. Helps the district locate training and other employee improvement help for employees if needed.
8. Continues to assist district board until problem is resolved.

Lessons Learned:

1. Conflicts and employee problems are going to exist.
2. The better job the board does of supervising and communicating with employees, the less likely conflicts will occur and when they do, they are easier to resolve.
3. Mediation may help, but experience has shown the longer the problem has existed the less chance mediation will work.
4. Cooperation from NRCS or other agencies involved is necessary to resolve many issues. The better the relationship is between board members and these other agency personnel, the easier it is to resolve a conflict.
5. The sooner the district board requests assistance from OCC, the more likely a fast and good resolution will result.

Suggestions from OCC to Districts to Avoid Conflicts and Performance Problems

1. Appoint one director as the day-to-day contact for an employee and make it a responsibility of that director to visit with the employee at least monthly about any issues in the office.
2. Provide employees with good position descriptions and performance standards that spell out what is expected of them in their job duties and in relations with others.
3. Establish policies on office procedures, office hours, purchasing authority for district employees, employee leave, etc.
4. Carry out scheduled performance reviews and discuss any issues employees would like to bring up.
5. Visit with the NRCS and other agency representatives on a regular basis to discuss relations and any issues in the office.
6. Encourage district employees to attend office staff meetings with NRCS and other agencies.
7. Document any problems that occur in the office and any actions taken by the board to resolve the issue. Monitor issue until resolved.