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District Personnel Management and Supervision

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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 lack 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.

The District Services Division of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission is often requested to assist with employee problems and with helping develop tools that will help the district board better supervise employees.

Challenges in Supervising District Employees:

1. District employee jobs and responsibilities vary from one district to another across the state in the 88 conservation districts. One secretarial position description for example, won't fit all situations.
2. District boards usually aren't experienced in developing position descriptions and that results in many employees with a standard position description that was developed as a sample and may be many years old.

3. It is difficult for district boards to supervise and manage employees without accurate position descriptions and standards of performance. When employee problems occur, it is difficult for boards to deal with because they often have not set standards and policies for their employees to follow.
4. Many board members feel they do not have adequate information to evaluate an employee since they do not see the employee “in action” on a daily basis.
5. Many boards fail to conduct performance reviews on a regular basis or decide that the only time a performance review is necessary is when an employee is not performing to standards.
6. Employees often don’t know what is required of them without policies and adequate position descriptions and may not be performing at a level expected (but not expressed to employee) by the board.
7. Many times boards and employees do not view the performance review process as a positive tool. To have good productive employees they need to hear when they are doing things right as well as when corrective action is needed.

How the Conservation Commission Provides Assistance:

1. Provides training to district directors on employee supervision and management.
2. Encourages districts to request assistance from the District Services Division to assist in the development of position descriptions and standards for employees.
3. Provides tips and techniques to gather information for other sources about an employee’s performance.
4. Encourages district boards to perform at least annual performance reviews for all employees and document that and other discussions about performance during the year.
5. District Services staff meets with district boards (at district board request) to discuss problems. Offers alternative ways of dealing with issues (The Conservation Commission has no authority over boards and is only there to advise and assist).
6. Helps districts locate training and other employee improvement help for employees if needed. Provides training to employees at area and state meetings and training sessions.
7. Encourages the board to establish policies that provide authorizations and boundaries for employees.

Lessons Learned:

1. The better job the board does of supervising and communicating with employees, the less likely conflicts and problems will occur and when they do, they are easier to resolve.
2. Providing employees with a position description, performance standards, and copy of district policies as soon as they enter the position will avoid problems in the future. And if problems occur, it puts the board in a better position to deal with them.