

Employee Handbook: Tool for Success or Necessary Evil?

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If I were to ask you whether your organization truly gets the maximum value out of its employee handbook, would you be able to say yes? Not if you haven't considered using the handbook as a tool to help your organization become fully successful.

How many employers who you know view the employee handbook as one of those necessary evils that is imposed on them by their attorneys or their HR departments? Viewed from the "necessary evil" perspective, the document has very limited value and even may encourage unwise behaviors. My contention is that employers who use their employee handbooks primarily or solely as a response to a legal requirement or as a form of legal protection are missing a great opportunity to send a positive message to their workforces. The fact is that a well-written and well-executed handbook is a very powerful tool for workplace success. Doesn't it make sense to choose to make that document one that enables employees to do their jobs better? Here are some of the outcomes you can expect when you utilize your employee handbook as a tool for success:

- *Fewer complaints* because decisions are made consistently across the organization.
- *Improved morale* because supportive language indicates that management respects and values employees.
- *Greater productivity* because clear boundaries reduce the need for micromanagement.
- *Alignment of employee decisions and behaviors with organizational goals* because worker see the benefits that accrue when their interests coincide with those of the employer.

The beginning of a new year provides a great opportunity to review organizational policies, procedures, and systems to be sure they still serve your purposes and are in compliance with relevant laws. Changes should be reflected in the employee handbook and communicated to all employees. As you evaluate your handbook this year, you can take some fairly straightforward and simple actions to ensure it is a tool for success. Many of the suggested

changes have to do with what the document says and, more importantly, **how** it says those things. Let's consider some ideas for making your employee handbook a tool for success first in terms of its content and then in terms of its implementation.

SUCCESS-ORIENTED CONTENT

The table below compares the content of the employee handbook from the perspectives of a necessary evil and of a tool for success. Which perspective is closer to that portrayed by your organization's handbook?

Element	"Necessary Evil" Perspective	"Tool for Success" Perspective
Primary focus	Enforce rules and regulations; punish non-compliance	Ensure fair and consistent treatment of all employees; support desired behaviors
Language	Legalistic, formal, indirect, technical, full of acronyms	Conversational, written at an appropriate level, direct, unambiguous
Tone	Impersonal, punitive, threatening, adversarial	Personal, respectful, supportive
Boundaries	Unclear, inflexible, overly constrictive; focus on what employees should NOT do	Clearly stated guidelines and outcomes; focus on what employees SHOULD do
Portrayal of employees	Commodities, order-takers, untrustworthy	Valued and respected members of the team, experts in their areas
Portrayal of management	All-knowing experts, enforcers	Supporters, resources, guides
Ease of use	Difficult to find information: few or confusing headings, minimal table of contents, no sample forms	Easy to find information: descriptive headings, detailed table of contents, samples of relevant forms included
Welcome letter	Missing or focused on the organization; impersonal tone; not signed or not signed by an executive	Focused on employees; warm tone; signed by CEO/President

An important question guiding the assessment of the employee handbook is this: does the handbook enable employees to be successful in their jobs? It may interest you to know that most employees want to do a good job and to meet or exceed management's expectations. Too often, however, the employee handbook does not help them do that, and it may even hinder their efforts. How? Handbooks that focus largely on telling employees what they should **not** do provide little or no guidance about what they **should** do. Just as providing effective feedback requires us to name the specific behavior or outcome that must change AND to identify its specific replacement, reading the employee handbook should enable employees to "see" clearly the desired behaviors and outcomes.

Focusing on outcomes will transform your handbook into a tool for success. Paint a picture of the desired outcomes, then give examples of how to achieve them. For example, if it's important that your employees' appearance convey a professional image, explain the business reason for establishing that requirement. Give examples of what "professional image" looks like so everyone "sees" the same picture. Provide the standards and expectations, and tell them who will judge the outcomes.

If your answer to the question about whether your employee handbook enables your employees to be successful in their jobs is anything other than a resounding "Yes!" then ask yourself what changes are required to transform it into such a tool. Take a look at the elements of the chart and identify some specific actions you can take. Here are a few other questions to get you started:

- Have you described the desired outcomes so employees can see the big picture?
- Have you provided the rationale for policies and procedures, particularly those that may be controversial?
- Are all important policies and procedures included?
- Will all employees be able to understand the document easily?
- Does the tone used throughout the document convey respect?
- Does the document communicate management's trust that employees will do the right thing?

The mere existence of a handbook is not enough. A critical success factor is the way that you use the document. Let's look at some implementation issues.

EMPLOYEE HANDBOOK IMPLEMENTATION

Having an employee handbook is an entirely different issue than **using** it. It is critical that management's behaviors support the stated policies and that their decisions are consistent across the organization. The clear boundaries must be supported by action. For example, it's not enough to **say** harassment will not be tolerated. Management must ensure that if or when harassment occurs, it is dealt with as outlined in the handbook.

Here are some questions to will help you assess the extent to which you use your employee handbook as a tool for success:

- How often do you train managers and supervisors on the stated policies and procedures?
- How proficient are managers and supervisors in answering questions about information in the handbook?
- Do you schedule periodic reviews of the document to ensure it continues to meet the organization's needs?
- How often and how well do you communicate the policies and procedures to employees and managers?
- How quickly do you communicate changes to the handbook to employees and managers?
- Does the document include employee acknowledgement forms to impress upon everyone how important particular policies are (e.g., sexual harassment avoidance, employment-at-will)?

In this day and age, employers are well advised to have a complete, accurate, and current employee handbook. Remember: how you view the employee handbook is your choice. I challenge you to make your managers' jobs easier and your organization and employees more successful by utilizing your employee handbook as a tool for success. ➔

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