

What Every Supervisor Needs to Know About Labor Agreements

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It's surprisingly easy to forget that management's front line troops in dealing with labor-management relations issues are supervisors and managers, *not* LR professionals.

Unfortunately, it's even easier to overlook the fact that rarely, if ever, do agencies equip them for that role by providing sufficient training in how to manage under a labor agreement.

Here are ten key points every supervisor and manager needs to be aware of in managing union represented employees under a contract.

1. In making almost any decision involving bargaining unit employees (e.g., overtime, sick leave, details, disciplinary action, temporary promotions), the first step—*before* taking action—should be the labor agreement.
2. Getting familiar with those provisions governing the most commonly raised issues—particularly those prone to friction, such as official time usage—will save time and unnecessary conflict later.
3. The words printed in the contract are barely the tip of the iceberg in determining the rules that govern the workplace. Lurking out of sight, but equally important, are established practices and MOUs.
4. Past practices often aren't. Knowledge of the key criteria that must be met to create a legitimate, binding past practice, as well as careful inspection of the facts surrounding a purported practice, will cause many of them to evaporate.
5. If the words of the contract are not crystal clear, and reasonably allow only one interpretation, it is never a mistake to ask LR for its take—before acting.
6. Rights written into a contract may appear to be chiseled in stone, but even they can be worn down, or sometimes lost altogether, through supervisors' failure to enforce them.
7. Consistency counts when managing under a labor agreement. That does not mean always doing exactly the same thing the same way, regardless of differing circumstances. But it does mean interpreting and applying the rules the same when all factors are equal.

8. Failure to enforce official time rules is always easier in the short run, but inevitably leads to headaches down the road.
9. Dealing with union officials in anything but a professional, business-like manner is a mistake you are certain to regret.
10. Taking it personal when employees or union officials challenge your decisions, fairness, intelligence, or common sense is understandable, but always a bad idea.

