

The Supervisor and the Human Resource Department

I use not only all the brains I have, but all I can borrow.

—Anonymous

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- Introduce the human resource department as a vital staff function that exists to support operating management and the employees.
- Outline the functions of human resources and indicate how these functions relate to the role of the supervisor.
- Describe a number of action steps the supervisor can take to ensure that he or she will obtain appropriate service from human resources when needed.
- Suggest what the supervisor can do to establish a working relationship with human resources that will lead to improved human resources service to the organization.

FOR CONSIDERATION: A FAVOR OR A TRAP?

"One morning, well before the start of your department's normal working hours, you were enjoying a cup of coffee in the cafeteria, sorting out some notes concerning your intentions for the day, when you were approached by one of your employees. The employee, Marge Nelson, who is one of your two or three most senior employees in terms of service, seated herself across from you and said, "There's something going on in the department that you need to know about, and I've waited far too long to tell you." Marge proceeded to tell you ("In strictest confidence, please, I know you'll understand why") that another long-term employee, Carrie James, had been making a great many derogatory comments about you throughout the department and generally questioning your competence.

For nearly 10 minutes Marge showered you with criticism of you, your management style, and your approach to individual employees, all attributed to Carrie James. On exhausting her litany Marge proclaimed that she did not ordinarily "carry tales" but that she felt you "had a right to know, for the good of the department—but please don't tell her I said anything."

Although Marge's comments were filled with "she said's" and "she did's," she being Carrie, and generally twice-told tales without connection to specific incidents, something extremely disturbing clicked in your mind while you were listening. Recently your posted departmental schedule had been altered, without your knowledge, in a way indicating that someone had tried to copy your handwriting and forge your initials. Two separate, seemingly unconnected comments by Marge together revealed that one of only two people could have altered your schedule. Those two people were Carrie James—and Marge Nelson herself.

As Marge finally fell silent you were left with an intense feeling of disappointment. You wondered if you could ever again fully trust two of your key employees.

Instructions

As you proceed through the chapter, consider how you will address the following three questions:

1. What should be your immediate response to Marge Nelson? Why?
2. Do you believe you have the basis on which to proceed with disciplinary action?
3. How can the human resource department help you in these circumstances?

"PERSONNEL" EQUALS PEOPLE

As a supervisor or first-line manager of any other title you are charged with the task of facilitating the work performance of a number of people. In this role you are expected to ensure that the efforts of your group are applied toward attainment of the organization's objectives. This must be done in such a way that the group functions more effectively with you than it would without you. And, as a first-line manager by any title, there are some days when you can use all the help you can get.

Help is where you find it in your organization, and one place where the supervisor can find help in abundance is the human resource (HR) department.

Human resources is today's more all-encompassing title for what most organizations once called personnel. Whatever the label, however, the true operative word is *people*. Management is frequently described as getting things done through people. People do the hands-on work and other people supervise them, and still other people oversee the supervisors and managers.

As surely as even the most sophisticated piece of medical equipment requires periodic maintenance to ensure its continued functioning, so, too, do the human beings who supply patient care require regular maintenance. And given that the "human machine" is generally unpredictable and varies considerably from person to person in numerous dimensions, the supervisor's "maintenance" will encompass many activities.

There are many places in the organization where the supervisor can go for help with various tasks and problems. For people problems, however, and for some straightforward people-related tasks that cannot yet be described as problems, the supervisor's greatest source of assistance is the human resource department. It remains only for the supervisor to take steps to access that assistance. It is to the individual supervisor's distinct advantage to know exactly what should be expected from human resources and how to get it when needed.

A VITAL STAFF FUNCTION

As a service department, human resources should be prepared to offer a variety of employee-related services in a number of ways. Human resources should anticipate numerous kinds of difficulties and needs and should

communicate the availability of assistance throughout the organization. For example, a personnel policy manual dispenses advice and guidance in employee matters, and top management's instructions to supervisors to seek one-on-one guidance from human resources in matters of disciplinary action are essentially "advertising" for human resource services.

But even though human resources should be prepared to help in a variety of ways and should have so advised all of management's ranks, HR cannot anticipate every specific need of each individual supervisor or manager. To truly put the human resource department to work, the supervisor must be prepared to take his or her needs to HR and expect answers or assistance.

The names human resources and personnel are still often used interchangeably and are presently used about equally as the designation for this particular service. Most common among a few other designations encountered are employee relations and labor relations. These latter two labels have also found use as descriptors of sub-functions of modern HR, with employee relations used relative to dealing with employee problems and problem employees, and labor relations referring to dealing with unions. Regardless of label, however, the mission of this particular service department should remain the same—to engage in acquiring, maintaining, and retaining employees so that the objectives of the organization may be fulfilled. As a critical staff function, HR does none of the actual work of the healthcare organization; rather, human resources facilitates the work of the organization by concerning itself with the organization's most important resource.

A SERVICE OF INCREASING VALUE

The human resource department has long been a resource of increasing value to the organization at large and the individual supervisor in particular. Its value has increased because of rational responses to a number of forces, both external and internal to the organization, that have resulted in additional tasks for someone. Two major forces have been the expansion in the number and kinds of tasks that have fallen to HR, and the proliferation of laws affecting aspects of employment. A third notable force is the tendency toward organizational "flattening" evident in present-day healthcare organizations.

Increase in Employee-Related Tasks

Like the majority of departments in a modern organization, there was a time when HR did not exist. And also like other departments, HR arose to fill a need.

The earliest human resource departments were commonly known as employment offices, created as businesses grew large enough to see the advantages of centralizing much of the process of acquiring employees. Employment and employment-related record keeping made up all the work of the employment office.

When wage and hour laws came into being, the "employment office" absorbed much of the concern for establishing standard rates of pay and monitoring their application relative to hours worked. This began the compensation function.

As organizations began to provide compensation in forms other than wages in response to new laws and other pressures both internal and external, the employment office took over the administration of what initially became known as "fringe benefits." And as organizations responded to labor legislation and to labor unions themselves, labor relations functions were added to the growing list of activities that shared a common theme: all had something to do with acquiring, maintaining, or retaining employees.

Other people activities were added as needed, and what had once been the employment office became personnel, literally, "the body of people employed by (the organization)." During the last two decades the term personnel began to be replaced by the term human resources, but the essential meaning remains the same. All the while, the HR function grew in value as it took on an increasing number of employee-related functions.

Proliferation of Laws Pertaining to Employment

A number of laws were of course primary in causing much of the increase in employee-related tasks described in the foregoing section. For example, the establishment of Social Security, Workers' Compensation, and Unemployment all created benefits tasks for HR, and much labor relations activity was brought about by laws. In addition, various antidiscrimination laws, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, the Equal Pay Act, and other legislation brought with them much new work for HR.

The anti-discrimination laws have forever changed the way many organizations do business. They have created a strongly law-oriented environment in which lawsuits and other formal discrimination complaints have become routine HR business. They have also turned employee recruitment in general, and specific processes such as performance evaluation and disciplinary action, into legal minefields filled with traps and pitfalls for the unwary. And in the process, they have created more work for HR and myriad reasons for the individual supervisor to turn to HR on more occasions.

Tendency toward Flattening

The tendency toward organizational flattening—the elimination of entire layers of management—has not appreciably added tasks to HR or increased the inherent importance of the HR function in and of itself. However, this force has markedly increased the importance of human resources to the individual supervisor.

Recent years have seen financially troubling times overtake many of the nation's hospitals. As hospital reimbursement is tightened and income grows at a lesser rate than costs, the resulting financial pinch is often felt in staffing, including numbers of management personnel. The first managers to suffer—as also has been the case in many other kinds of organizations—are middle managers.

Financial problems have caused significant reductions in middle management positions, but all such reductions have not been owing to money troubles alone. Increasing reliance on certain modern approaches to management,

those approaches calling for increased employee participation and the making of decisions as close as possible to the bottom of the hierarchy and thus closest to where the action is, also have resulted in the necessity for fewer middle managers.

Regardless of how it occurs, a reduction in the number of middle managers means that more decisions must be made closer to the bottom of the organization. This means that certain decisions that might once have been made by a middle manager—like, for instance, sanctioning an employment offer at a rate above the normal entry rate, deciding how far to proceed in a particular disciplinary action, or determining how to proceed in a situation that includes some degree of legal risk—are forced down to the level of the supervisor.

The more employee-related decisions are forced to the first line of management, the more the first-line manager—the individual supervisor—has to depend on the guidance and support of the human resource department. Thus the tendency toward flattening has increased the value of HR to the supervisor.

LEARNING ABOUT YOUR HR DEPARTMENT

To be able to get the most out of the organization's human resource department it is first necessary to understand the nature of the HR function, to know how HR relates organizationally, and to be familiar with the functions performed by your particular HR department.

The Nature of the Function: Staff Versus Line

Human resources has already been described in these pages as a staff function. As opposed to a line activity, which is a function in which people actually perform the work of the organization (for example, nursing or clinical laboratories), a staff function enhances and supports the performance of the organization's work. The presence of a staff function should make a difference to the extent that the organization's work is more effectively accomplished with the staff function than without it.

Appreciation of the distinction between line and staff is critical because a staff function cannot legitimately make decisions that are the province of line management. Operating decisions belong to operating management; they must be made within the chains of command of the line departments. The primary purpose of human resources in enhancing and supporting work performance is to recommend courses of action that are (1) consistent with legislation, regulation, and principles of fairness, and (2) in the best interests of the organization as a whole.

It is not unusual for some managers to blame human resources for decisions other than those they would have made by themselves. Complaints such as "Personnel made me do it," or "This is the HR department's decision," are not uncommon from managers whose preferred decisions are altered because of HR's recommendations. However, human resources generally does not—and should never—have the authority to overrule line management in any matter, personnel or otherwise. If, as occasionally is the case, a personnel decision of line management must be reversed for the good of the organization, the

overruling is done by higher line management. Human resources may have to reach out and bring higher management into the process when a supervisor insists on pursuing a decision that HR has recommended against, but it must remain line management that actually decides.

As to whether line management readily listens to its advisors in human resources depends largely on the apparent professionalism of the HR function and HR's track record in making solid recommendations.

The Human Resource Reporting Relationship

The modern HR department will—or at least should—report to one of the two top managers in the organization. Depending on the particular organizational scheme employed, the human resource manager might report to the president or chief executive officer (CEO) or perhaps to the executive vice president or chief operating officer (COO). Generally, human resources should report to a level no lower than the level that has authority over all of the organization's line or operating functions.

Human resources must be in a position to serve all of the organization's operating units equally and impartially. This cannot be done if HR reports to one particular operating division that stands as the organizational equal of other divisions. If, for example, HR reports to a vice president for general services who is the organizational equal of three other vice presidents, HR cannot equally serve all divisions because of being ultimately responsible to just one of those divisions.

Be wary if your HR department reports in the undesirable manner just described. Regardless of how well the HR function might be managed, at times of conflict, when inevitable differences arise concerning personnel decisions, you may conclude that the division that "owns" HR is usually the division that wins. Independence and impartiality are essential for human resources to function effectively for the whole organization, and independence and impartiality are impossible in perception and unlikely in actuality if HR is assigned to one of multiple operating divisions.

Be wary also of the occasionally encountered practice of duplicating HR functions within the same facility. For example, one will encounter the occasional hospital in which the department of nursing has its own HR function while another HR office serves all other departments. Although there are occasional advantages to be gained from basing some recruiting activity in the nursing department, splitting or subdividing other HR activities tends to create duplication of effort while increasing the organization's exposure to legal risks.

The Human Resource Functions

There are almost as many possible combinations of human resource functions as there are HR departments. A great many activities that may be generally described as "administrative" can find their way into the human resource department. However, we will here be concerned with the significant activities or groups of functions that are often identified as the tasks of human resources.

The basic HR functions are as follows:

- *Employment, often referred to as recruiting.* This is the overall process of acquiring employees—advertising and otherwise soliciting applicants, screening applicants, referring candidates to managers, checking references, extending offers of employment, and bringing employees into the organization.
- *Compensation, or wage and salary administration.* This is the process of creating and maintaining a wage structure and ensuring that this structure is administered fairly and consistently. Related to compensation, as well as to other HR task groupings, are job evaluation, the creation of job descriptions, and maintenance of a system of employee performance evaluation.
- *Benefits administration.* This activity is a natural offshoot of wage and salary administration, since benefits are actually a part of an employee's total compensation. Benefits administration consists of maintaining the organization's benefit structure and assisting employees in understanding and accessing their benefits.
- *Employee relations.* This activity may be generally described as dealing with problem employees and employees who have problems. It may range from handling employee complaints or appeals through processing disciplinary actions to arranging employee recognition and recreation activities.

One can see the foregoing four general activities at work in essentially every human resource function regardless of size and overall scope. In a very large organization these will be separate departments within a larger HR structure, each with its own head and its own staff and perhaps including multiple subdivisions. In a very small organization these are likely to be the tasks of a single person who has other duties as well.

One additional basic function that may be encountered is *labor relations*. Although labor relations may be a functional title that identifies a whole department or simply a human resource department activity, it is also a relatively generic label that applies to the maintenance of a continuing relationship with a bargaining unit, that is, a labor union. Again, depending on size, labor relations may be a subdivision of HR in its own right or simply one of several responsibilities assigned to one person.

Other activities that might be found within human resources include the following:

- *Employee health.* Often part of HR, in healthcare organizations it sometimes will be a part of one of the medical divisions.
- *Training (for both managers and rank-and-file employees).* With the exception of nursing in-service education, traditionally a part of the nursing department, if a formal training function exists it is most often part of human resources.
- *Payroll.* In the past, it was often part of "personnel," but in recent years payroll has usually resided in the finance division. However, a working interrelationship of personnel and payroll has always been essential, and recent years, bringing integrated personnel/payroll systems, have seen the beginnings of payroll's organizational shift back toward HR.

- *Security and parking.* With increasing frequency, security and parking, because of their strong employee relationships, are becoming attached to HR. However, they are presently more likely to be found attached to an environmental or facilities division.
- *Safety.* As with security, safety is becoming increasingly attached to HR; but is just as likely to be found in the facilities division.
- *Child care.* As an activity that is presented largely as an employee service, an organization's child care function is most likely assigned to human resources.

Rounding Out Your Knowledge

Using the foregoing paragraphs as a guide, determine exactly which functions are performed by your organization's human resource department. Furthermore, take steps to attach a person's name to each function. You should strive to be in a position in which you understand how the HR department is organized, so you know generally who does what, who reports to whom, and who bears overall responsibility. Moreover, you should also make certain that you know the organizational relationships of sometimes-HR functions (e.g., security) that belong elsewhere in your particular organization, so you can ensure that you always take certain matters to the correct department.

Next, take the time to make a list of the supervisory functions or activities you encounter that can lead you to seek information or assistance from human resources. The lists of most supervisors may have a great deal in common in that they might include the following:

- *Employment:* Finding sufficient qualified candidates from whom to fill an open position
- *Benefits:* Providing information with which to answer employees' benefits questions
- *Compensation:* Providing information with which to answer employees' questions related to pay
- *Employee problems:* Determining where to send a particular employee who is having difficulty with (whatever the problem area)
- *Job descriptions/job evaluations:* Determining how to proceed in questioning the salary grade of any particular position
- *Policy interpretations:* Determining the appropriate interpretation of personnel policy for any particular instance
- *Disciplinary actions:* Determining how to proceed in dealing with what appear to be violations of work rules
- *Performance problems:* Determining how to proceed in dealing with employees whose work performance is consistently below the department's standard
- *Performance appraisals:* Securing guidance in doing appropriate performance appraisals, and finding out how much one can depend on human resources to coordinate the overall appraisal process

The foregoing list can doubtless be expanded by each supervisor who may refer to it. One helpful method of expanding your list includes leafing through your organization's personnel policy manual and employee handbook; this process will bring to mind additional areas of concern that you encounter in your work.

PUTTING THE HR DEPARTMENT TO WORK

A Universal Approach

The first, simplest, and most valuable advice to be offered for getting the most out of your human resource department involves the age-old two-step process of initiation and follow-up. It is but a slight variation on a practice followed by most successful supervisors.

The successful supervisor knows that any task worth assigning is worth a specific deadline. The "do-it-when-you-have-a-chance" or "when-you-think-about-it" approach breeds procrastination, delay, and inaction. An assignment—necessarily a well-thought-out, specific assignment—must be accompanied by a target for completion, a deadline which, though it may be generous or even loose, leaves no doubt as to expected completion. And when that deadline arrives and no results have been forthcoming, the supervisor then exercises the most important part of the total process—faithful follow-up. Faithful follow-up is the key; the supervisor who always waits a week beyond the deadline is behaviorally telling the employees that they always have at least an extra week.

Anything needed from the human resource department should be addressed in a similar manner. Relative to the HR department, the process might be summarized as follows:

- Make certain that the function of interest is part of HR's responsibilities, and determine, if possible, who in HR would be the best person to approach on the topic.
- Refine your question or need such that your inquiry is sufficiently specific to permit a specific response.
- When you make contact and convey your need to the appropriate person, if the answer is not immediately available ask when an answer will be supplied.
- If the promised reply date occurs later than your legitimate need date, negotiate a deadline agreeable to both you and HR.
- If your agreed-upon deadline arrives and you have not received your answer, follow up with the HR department. Follow up politely, follow up diplomatically, but follow up faithfully. Never let an unanswered deadline pass without following up.

This process should be applied to problems, issues, and concerns that you as a supervisor would consider taking to human resources. It should also—and especially—be applied to questions and concerns that your employees bring to you. If an employee's question in any way involves human resource concerns, and if you are unable to respond appropriately, then you need to take the question to HR as though it were your own.

Some Specific Action Steps

Any number of supervisory needs present opportunities to put the human resource department to work. The more frequently encountered of these include the following.

Finding New Employees

There are any number of points in the employment process at which the supervisor and HR must work together. Fulfill your end of the working relationship, and expect HR staff to fulfill theirs. For example, if none of the five candidates HR has supplied for a particular position is truly appropriate, ask for more; do not settle for only what you are given if what you are given is not enough. (For your part of the arrangement, do not continue to call for more applicants in your search for the "perfect" candidate if you have already seen two or three who meet the posted requirements of the job.) Also, stay in touch with HR concerning the extending of offers, the checking of references, and the scheduling of pre-employment physical examinations and starting dates. Do not be unreasonable: recognize that these activities take time. By making your interest and attention known, however, you will encourage completion of the process.

Bringing Job Descriptions Up-to-Date

The supervisor ordinarily has a significant responsibility in maintaining current job descriptions for the department. The HR department usually also has the responsibility for associating a pay level with each job and for maintaining central files of up-to-date job descriptions. Your part is best done within your department; job descriptions should be written in large part by those who do the work and those who supervise the doing of the work. However, you need to deliberately involve HR in contributing consistently to every necessary job description and in ensuring that each job is properly placed on a pay scale. Once again, your visible interest in the process will encourage timely completion of HR's activities.

Disciplining Employees

Regardless of the extent of human resource involvement in the disciplinary process, it is not the HR department that decides upon disciplinary action. The HR department disciplines nobody (except employees of the HR department, as necessary). Any employee deserving of disciplinary action must be disciplined through his or her immediate chain of command. In most organizations it is a requirement for the supervisor to take proposed disciplinary actions through human resources before implementation. Whether or not this is so for your organization, you need to take your best assessment to HR and ask for advice. And you need to expect sound advice, whether in the form of a single recommendation, complete with rationale for doing so, or as two or more alternatives, each with its own possible consequences fully explained. The decision is theoretically all yours, and if it is a poor decision you will bear much of the blame. Do not let HR avoid responsibility by failing to provide specific direction; insist on complete HR participation in deciding upon disciplinary action.

Evaluating Employees

One of the most important tasks of the supervisor is the appraisal of employee performance. No formal system of performance appraisal can function consistently throughout the organization without the central guidance usually provided by human resources. Although you can certainly evaluate your employees' performance without the assistance of HR, you can do a much more consistently acceptable job of evaluation with HR involvement. Most of human resources' involvement in evaluation should occur automatically as far as the supervisor is concerned. The HR department should provide forms, instructions, schedules, and reminders throughout the process. However, if the HR department is not always on top of the supervisor's employee appraisal needs, according to the needs of the moment the supervisor should do the following:

- Keep track of scheduled review dates and ask HR for forms and timetables if they are not supplied automatically.
- Ask for periodic instruction in how to apply rating criteria, especially if criteria have changed and refresher instruction is not supplied.
- Keep HR advised of how changing job requirements may be affecting the application of criteria based on previous requirements.
- Ask HR for rating profile information; that is, statistical information that reveals patterns in the supervisor's rating practices and shows whether those patterns are changing with time, and perhaps also shows how this specific supervisor's rating patterns compare with those of other supervisors.

Addressing Training Needs

If the human resource department has responsibility for any kind of employee training—and in most healthcare organizations there is a better-than-even chance that this is so—do not wait for human resources to come to you and offer employee training. If there are training needs in your work group, take them to HR. If, for example, you feel several of your employees require training in basic telephone techniques, take your well-defined need to human resources, negotiate a timetable for providing the training, and offer to become personally involved in the training. (With appropriate HR involvement, every supervisor is a potentially valuable instructor in some topic.)

The foregoing are presented as a few specific suggestions but are offered primarily to convey a general idea to the supervisor: The human resource department exists as a service function for all employees; it remains for the supervisor to take each legitimate personnel-related need to HR and to ask for—and expect—an honest response.

WANTED: WELL-CONSIDERED INPUT

The most effective human resource departments are not one-way dispensers of information and assistance. The most effective human resource departments are those that are responsive to the needs of the organization's work force. However, the HR department can go only so far in anticipating needs

and meeting them within the limits of available resources. To be fully effective, the HR department must learn of employee needs from employees and supervisors and must in turn go to top management with solid proposals for meeting the most pressing needs.

Some employees, although usually only a few, take their own questions, concerns, and suggestions to the human resource department. However, many employees will never do so for themselves; their needs, whether conveyed through words, actions, or attitudes, must find their way to human resources and eventually to top management through their supervisors.

Among the kinds of information that the supervisor should pass to human resources are:

- reactions to various personnel policies, especially when specific policies seem to have become less appropriate under changing conditions
- employee attitudes concerning pay and benefits, especially perceptions of inequities and alleged instances of unfair treatment
- complaints—and compliments—about employee services such as cafeteria and parking
- comments on the appropriateness of various employee benefits, and perceptions of benefits needed or desired as opposed to those presently given
- potential changes in any or all means of acquiring, maintaining, or retaining employees that might afford the organization a competitive edge in its community

UNDERSTANDING WHY AS WELL AS WHAT

It is relatively easy to determine what human resources as a department does within the organization. However, it is necessary to go beyond what and develop an appreciation of why this department does what it does and why HR sometimes must espouse a position in opposition to a line department's position.

Consider the case of the supervisor who appeals to the HR department to help resolve a seemingly unending series of difficulties by agreeing to the termination of a particular employee. As the supervisor says, "I simply can't do any more with this person. She's chronically late in spite of all my warnings. Her absenteeism disrupts staffing; she uses up her sick time as fast as she earns it. Her attitude is absolutely terrible; she's been rude to patients and families; and the way she talks to me borders on insubordination most of the time. Her clinical skills are just average at best, and she's a disruptive influence on the unit. I've been patient longer than anyone has the right to expect of me, but nothing has changed. I want to discharge her."

As often occurs in such circumstances, the human resource practitioner hearing the supervisor's request briefly reviews the employee's background and immediately recommends against termination. This may understandably disappoint and upset the supervisor and leave her displeased with the HR department. She may complain, with some justification, that she ought to be supported in her efforts to get rid of an unsatisfactory employee. She may well view HR as obstructive and adopt an adversarial position, perhaps even attempting to solicit the assistance of her own higher management in opposing the human resource position.

Why would human resources be automatically protective of an employee whose relationship with work is as bad as described above? The differences lie in (1) the supervisor's perspective versus the human resource department's perspective and (2) the frequently cited employee personnel file—"the record."

The supervisor's perspective is unit or departmental. The supervisor is legitimately focused on the good of the patients and the good of the unit, and the employee in question threatens both. However, human resources must view the issues in two ways that conflict with the supervisor's perspective. In micro terms, HR must be concerned with the rights of the individual employee; in macro terms, HR must be concerned with the good of the total organization. The organization is of course no more than the sum total of a number of individuals, but in focusing on the one and the all the HR perspective fails to match that of the supervisor, which is necessarily focused on more than one but much less than all.

Then there is "the record" to consider. In the foregoing case it turns out that all of the supervisor's warnings concerning tardiness were oral warnings of which no record exists. The same was true for warnings of absenteeism, except for a single written warning that is too old to give weight to present disciplinary action. No other warnings appear in the personnel file, and although in the mind of the supervisor this employee has always been less than satisfactory, the personnel file includes several performance evaluations which, although not glowing with praise, suggest at least minimally acceptable performance. In short, there is no basis for termination except in the supervisor's mind.

In regard to problems such as that just described, the HR department is:

- defending the rights of the individual, not only because doing so arises from a sense of fairness but also because there are many laws requiring the organization to do so
- protecting the total organization from a multitude of legal risks

Whenever there is a risk that an employee problem or complaint will be taken outside of the organization, it is best to think of any criticism of employee conduct or performance in a single light: If it is not in the record, it never happened. Except in instances of termination for major infractions calling for immediate discharge (and these days even many of these actions are successfully challenged), a discharge must be backed up with a written trail describing all that occurred. It is legally necessary to be able to demonstrate that the employee was given every reasonable opportunity to correct the offending behavior or improve the unsatisfactory performance.

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THIS...

Referring to the case presented in "For Consideration" at the beginning of the chapter, clearly this places before you something that could conceivably be a trap but in no way constitutes a favor. Regardless of all the "information" Marge claims to be giving you, all she has in fact done for you is to give you cause to worry. With "friends" like Marge Nelson, who needs enemies?

Your immediate response, while Marge is there in front of you, should include an effort to solicit specific information, to give you something you can verify and use. You will probably not receive specifics but you should make the

effort, attempting to learn anything that can be verified. You also should let Marge know that second-hand information is often more troublesome than no information at all; it helps you not at all, but you cannot help worrying because of it. You also might consider asking Marge what her object is in talking with you about such matters, and perhaps suggest that she bring you nothing else unless it is information you can corroborate and act on.

There is no basis on which to proceed with disciplinary action. Disciplinary action should never be based on hearsay.

The human resource department, specifically an employee relations manager or someone with a similar title and duties, can help you sort out the possibilities and better prepare you to deal with both Carrie James and Marge Nelson. Discuss the Marge Nelson conversation in detail with human resources, and especially seek out human resources if you should be similarly approached by Carrie James. Human resources can suggest how you can go about monitoring conditions in your department and can help you avoid being used by one party against another in the event of a James-versus-Nelson struggle in the department. It is highly likely that Marge Nelson's reasons for coming to you with her tales about others fall a bit shy of caring for the "good of the department" and come closer to a personal agenda that includes undermining Carrie James and possibly you as well.

EMPHASIS ON SERVICE

As a staff function, human resources is organized as a service activity. Service activities render no patient care; they do not advance the work of the organization. However, they support the performance of the organization's work and in a practical sense become necessary. For example, if a pure service such as building maintenance did not exist, the facility's physical plant would gradually self-destruct. Similarly, without human resources to see to the maintenance of the work force, the overall suitability and capability of that work force would steadily erode.

Recognize human resources for what it is: an essential service function required to help the organization run as efficiently as possible.

Learn what the HR department does, and especially learn why the department does what it does. Provide input to the human resource department. Forge a continuing working relationship with the HR department, making it clear that you expect service from this essential service department. Challenge the HR department to do more, to do better, and to continually improve service—and put the human resource department to work for you and your employees.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

1. What characteristics of the human resource department make it a staff activity rather than a line activity?
2. What were the primary factors causing expansion of human resource activities from this department's original "employment office" function?

3. Why must the individual supervisor be at least nominally conversant with the structure and details of the organization's benefit package?
4. Why might human resources often appear to be opposing a supervisor who desires to take a drastic action such as discharging an employee? What is the purpose of such resistance?
5. Identify the four basic human resource functions and provide one example of each related to your most recent employment.
6. Does line management figure in the operation of human resources at all? If so, how?
7. Why should human resources report to the chief executive officer or the chief operating officer?
8. Why should you be required to bring potentially serious disciplinary issues to human resources?
9. What are the hazards of other organizational functions—for example, nursing—doing all of their own recruiting and maintaining their own employment records?
10. What was the single piece of legislation that forever changed the way human resources does business and how were the changes felt?

EXERCISE: WHERE CAN HUMAN RESOURCES HELP?

Review the human resource functions as outlined in this chapter. Within each major function, identify the subfunctions that involve you as a supervisor. (For example, under the employment or recruiting function you will probably have no role in locating or screening applicants, but you will be actively involved in interviewing job candidates. As another example, you will have no active responsibility for administering benefits, but you will often be expected to come up with answers to your employees' questions about benefits.)

When you have generated a complete list of human resource subfunctions that require your active involvement, determine who in your human resource department is most involved with each and associate one or two names with each subfunction. Most supervisors' lists will be likely to include selection interviewing, answering benefit questions, doing performance evaluations, and taking disciplinary action. This can become the basis of a reference list to help familiarize you with the individual specialties and strengths of the organization's human resource practitioners.

As an additional activity, review your list of pertinent human resource subfunctions. For each human resource subfunction with which you are involved, indicate the major areas of legislation (e.g., "antidiscrimination laws") and the specific laws (e.g., "Immigration Reform and Control Act") that are of concern to your performance of the subfunction.