

Employee Handbooks: Laying Out the Rules

by Diana Hanson

Wouldn't it be great if new employees already knew all of your rules and procedures when you hired them? Since they don't, however, writing down the basics of what you expect from your employees will save you a lot of time and aggravation.

While an employee handbook won't solve all your management problems, it can be a useful tool for helping you manage your crew. When you clearly lay out your company's rules in a handbook, you are removing the mystery surrounding your expectations, and you will find that your crew performs better as a result.

You, too, will have to live by the rules you put in your employee handbook, so give careful thought to what you include, to avoid having to eat your words.

Hours of Operation

A definition of the work week should include the days and hours employees are expected to be present and available for work. Do you always begin work at the same time? Do your employees meet you at the job site? What about breaks during the day? What if it rains?

Setting down the rules in your handbook gets you organized and lets the crew know what is expected of them.

Courtesy

Anything you can do to make homeowners more comfortable with having your crew on their property is good

for business. Include in the handbook how you expect your crew to conduct themselves on the job. Lay out the rules for how to leave a job site at the end of the workday. Describe how you want materials to be organized for the next day, how to deal with trash and the scrap pile, and what to do with the sawdust.

When you check in with your homeowners, they will be pleased, and then they will brag to their neighbors — who by now have a growing case of deck envy — about how orderly your crew was.

If "choice words" are a particular irritation to you — or, more important, to your customers — say so in the rules. Putting your policy in writing is a good idea if you don't want the issue to come up on the job (in front of Mrs. Smith and her two young children).

Aside from the safety factors of unmonitored job-site fashion, your crew's appearance is a reflection of

know, then describe appropriate job-site dress in your handbook. Maybe include a photograph of an appropriately dressed crew member.

Absence and Tardiness

I've heard that in certain parts of the country entire crews up and quit at hunting season. If the crew of a ship did that, it would be called mutiny — once punished at sea by forcing the offender to walk the plank. You can't make anyone walk the plank, but clearly stating your policy of allowed time off can be crucial to controlling your crew.

Employees are hired because they are needed. Frequent tardiness and absences are unfair to fellow employees and affect the performance of the entire crew. Advance notice of an absence should be provided when possible.

Stating in your handbook that a worker needs to call you when he or she is going to be late or out sick may

mean you'll have fewer no-show surprises. Stating that you track absences and tardiness may also cause habitual Monday absentees to rethink their Sunday activities.

If you don't work on certain holidays, set them down on paper, so crew members know ahead of time and can plan accordingly.

Cell Phone Use

Most of us carry cell phones these days. They can be invaluable for checking

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your company and will make an impression on the homeowner one way or another. What does your crew wear to work? Do they have shirts with the company logo? If you don't want your crew to wear T-shirts with offensive statements on them and ripped jeans so low that ... well, you

on a late delivery or getting directions. But what about on the job site? How do you feel when you see a worker stop work to answer a call? Besides being a distraction — and therefore a safety issue — cell phone calls mean downtime for your company. You could add to your handbook that cell phones are to be left turned off except during breaks and lunch periods.

Operating Procedures

Your handbook can have a tremendous positive effect on how you conduct business. The act of setting down the procedures you want followed causes you to go through the mental steps of how things should be done, and you will find it makes you and your crew more efficient. Referring to your handbook in interviews with prospective employees to clearly com-

municate your expectations can make the hiring process easier, as well.

It's up to you to decide how detailed your handbook should be, but you may want to include some of these headings: Job-Site Setup and Take-Down, Company Tools (cleaning and maintenance schedules), and Inventory Control.

End of Story

Picture a crew that arrives at the job site on time, dressed appropriately and without a cell phone to be seen. Then imagine them setting up the tools and work areas in the most logical order for efficient deck building and having all of the inventory and supplies needed for the job.

Now wake up from your dream. Even the best handbook won't keep Mr. Murphy (of Murphy's Law) and

Captain Chaos completely at bay. And handbooks are not a substitute for frequent, simple, and direct communication with employees.

There are numerous businesses that write employee handbooks or offer templates. Whether you use a service or write your own, be sure to seek legal counsel before putting your handbook into use. Employment laws vary from state to state, and employee handbooks can be viewed as a contract in a court of law. A lawyer can help keep you out of trouble with your state's department of employment. ♦

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