

Accountability Made Practical:

Tools Every Supervisor Needs

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What is the hardest part of supervising people?

- Giving difficult feedback
- Documentation
- Holding people accountable consistently
- Faculty-specific issues
- Fear of conflict
- Knowing when to involve HR
- Managing performance fairly





Why This Conversation Matters Right Now

- Higher education leaders are increasingly navigating:
 - Social media and reputational risk
 - Political and ideological tensions
 - Faculty governance and academic freedom concerns
 - Remote and hybrid workplace challenges
 - AI misuse and confidentiality concerns
 - Burnout, disengagement, and morale issues
 - Increased public scrutiny and legal risk
 - Reluctance to address performance concerns early

Bottom Line:

It's important that supervisors know they do not have to navigate complex employee issues alone.



Important Grounding & Disclaimer

- Grounded in operational HR executive leadership in higher education
- Professional background in training, leadership development, and organizational learning in the private sector
- Ph.D. in Adult Learning & Leadership
- Experience primarily in non-union environments
- Not legal advice or legal interpretation
- Institutional policies, faculty handbooks, contracts, and governance structures vary significantly
- Always partner with Human Resources, Academic Affairs, and Legal Counsel/General Counsel as appropriate.

Important Acknowledgement

Not all leaders operate within highly collaborative institutional environments. The practices shared today are grounded in consistency, fairness, documentation, accountability, and institutional risk mitigation.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Distinguish between performance and conduct concerns
- Set clear and objective expectations
- Deliver constructive feedback effectively
- Understand the fundamental of progressive discipline
- Navigate higher education-specific considerations
- Recognize when to involve HR, Academic Affairs, and/or Legal Counsel
- Apply practical strategies using real-world higher education scenarios





Leadership Reality Check

Many supervisors struggle because they:

- Avoid difficult conversations
- Wait too long to address concerns
- Lack documentation
- Rely on subjective frustrations
- Fear conflict or escalation
- Are uncertain about ADA/FMLA
- Treat accountability as punishment instead of leadership

Accountability should never be a surprise.



Foundational Definitions

Performance Issue

A concern related to an employee's ability to meet job expectations, responsibilities, productivity, quality standards, or essential job functions.

Conduct Issue

Behavior that violates institutional expectations, policies, professionalism standards, or workplace norms.

Coaching

An informal supervisory conversation intended to improve performance, clarify expectations, or address concerns early.

Corrective Action

Steps taken to address and improve performance or behavioral concerns through clear actions, accountability, support, and follow-up.



Foundational Definitions, cont.

Documentation

Objective written records that capture observed behaviors, conversations, expectations, and next steps.

Progressive Discipline

A structured corrective process designed to address ongoing concerns through escalating levels of accountability and intervention.

Due Process

The consistent and fair application of institutional procedures before significant employment actions are taken.

Protected Activity

Legally protected employee actions such as requesting accommodations, taking approved leave, participating in investigations, or reporting concerns.

Performance vs. Conduct

Performance Examples

- Missed deadlines
- Incomplete work
- Attendance concerns
- Poor responsiveness
- Failure to meet expectations

Conduct Examples

- Insubordination
- Unprofessional communication
- Harassment/discrimination concerns
- Boundary violations
- Disruptive behavior

Important: Some situations involve BOTH performance and conduct concerns.





Clarity Prevents Conflict

Supervisors should clearly communicate:

- Job responsibilities
- Attendance expectations
- Communication norms
- Productivity expectations
- Professional conduct standards
- Team expectations
- Department priorities
- Institutional mission, vision, values, strategic plan/goals, and expectations

If expectations are unclear:

- Accountability feels personal
- Documentation becomes weak
- Conflict increases
- Consistency decreases

Common Accountability Mistakes

- Waiting too long to intervene
- Hoping the issue resolves itself
- Giving vague feedback
- Failing to document patterns
- Avoiding difficult conversations
- Managing through frustrations
- Treating employees inconsistently
- Escalating without prior feedback
- Confusing kindness with avoidance

Early accountability conversations create clarity and reduce escalation.



What Supervisors Actually Control

Supervisors are responsible for:

- Setting expectations
- Giving feedback
- Addressing concerns
- Documenting patterns
- Communicating impact
- Maintaining consistency
- Supporting accountability

HR/Legal are responsible for:

- ADA/FMLA guidance
- Accommodation processes
- Compliance interpretation
- Investigations
- Legal risk review
- Formal procedural guidance

You focus on performance.

HR focuses on compliance and process.





Accountability & Protected Leave Can Coexist

Employees may still be held accountable for:

- Essential job functions
- Attendance expectations (within approved accommodations)
- Performance standards
- Professional conduct
- Communication expectations

Important:

ADA/FMLA protections do not eliminate accountability expectations.

Supervisors should:

- Focus on performance and behavior
- Avoid medical analysis
- Partner with HR appropriately
- Document objectively and consistently



Before Significant Employment Action

In partnership with HR and/or Legal Counsel, institutions should review:

- Appointment letters and contracts
- Faculty handbook provisions
- Institutional policies and procedures
- Prior documentation and corrective actions
- Applicable notice requirements
- Relevant accommodations or leave considerations
- Ongoing investigations or protected activity concerns

Key Considerations:

What obligations and processes has the institution agreed to follow?



Decision Framework

Clarify → Address → Document → Inform → Consult → Escalate

1. **Clarify:** Ensure expectations are clear.
2. **Address:** Have the conversation early.
3. **Document:** Record concerns objectively.
- 4.
5. **Inform:** Keep leadership appropriately informed.
6. **Consult:** Partner with HR and/or Legal Counsel.
7. **Escalate:** Determine appropriate next steps when necessary.



Reflection & Application Activity

Think About a Current or Recent Employee Situation

Choose a situation involving:

- Performance concerns
- Attendance issues
- Communication challenges
- Conduct concerns
- Faculty accountability
- Documentation challenges
- Team conflict
- Or another supervisory issue



Reflection & Application Activity, cont. 1.

Using the framework we discussed, identify:

1. What is the core issue?
 - Performance
 - Conduct
 - Both
2. Which step are you currently in?
Clarify → Address → Document → Inform → Consult → Escalate
3. What action needs to happen next?
4. Who, if anyone, should be involved?
 - HR
 - Academic Affairs
 - Legal Counsel
 - Supervisor/Leadership
5. What risk areas should be considered?
 - ADA/FMLA
 - Contractual obligations
 - Faculty governance
 - Retaliation concerns
 - Documentation gaps
 - Policy inconsistencies

**Focus on process, clarity,
consistency, and
accountability – not
punishment.**

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Reflection & Application Activity, cont. 2.

Group Debrief

Discussion Questions

- What steps do supervisors most often skip?
- Where do situations typically begin to escalate?
- What role does documentation play?
- What situations feel most uncomfortable to address?
- When should HR be brought in earlier?

Group Case Study Activity

In groups:

- Review your case study handout
- Discuss the situation using the framework provided
- Identify:
 - Key concerns
 - Institutional risks
 - Recommended next steps
 - And appropriate involvement of HR/leadership

Be prepared to report out:

- Your group's recommended approach
- Key risks identified
- Lessons learned

Reminder:

Focus on:

- Process
- Consistency
- Documentation
- Accountability
- And risk mitigation

NOT simply discipline or termination.



Case Study #1

Social Media, Faculty Conduct, & Institutional Pressure





Case Study #1

Best Practice Considerations

- Avoid emotionally reactive decision-making.
- Review appointment letters, contracts, faculty handbook provisions, and applicable policies first.
- Separate public pressure from institutional process.
- Assess whether concerns involve:
 - Academic freedom,
 - Protected speech,
 - Policy violations,
 - Hostile environment concerns,
 - Or professional conduct expectations.
- Consult HR, Academic Affairs, and General Counsel early.
- Document complaints, concerns, and institutional response steps objectively.
- Ensure consistency with prior institutional responses.
- Focus on process, fairness, and institutional integrity.

Case Study #2

Attendance, Accommodation, & Accountability





Case Study #2

Best Practice Considerations

- ADA/FMLA protections do not eliminate accountability expectations.
- Supervisors should focus on:
 - Performance,
 - Attendance,
 - Communication,
 - And essential job functions.
- HR should guide:
 - Accommodation discussions,
 - Leave processes,
 - And compliance considerations.
- Documentation should reflect:
 - Observed behaviors,
 - Attendance patterns,
 - Missed expectations
 - And prior conversations.
- Avoid medical analysis or assumptions.
- Continue communicating expectations clearly and consistently.
- Accountability and empathy can coexist.

Case Study #3

Faculty Non-Renewal & Contractual Obligations





Case Study #3

Best Practice Considerations

- Review:
 - Appointment letter(s)
 - Faculty handbook provisions,
 - Notice requirements,
 - And institutional policy obligations first.
- Distinguish:
 - Performance concerns,
 - Conduct concerns,
 - And collegiality expectations carefully.
- Ensure documentation reflects:
 - Specific examples,
 - Prior feedback,
 - And expectations communicated.
- Avoid relying on generalized frustration or reputation-based concerns.
- Consult HR, Academic Affairs, and Legal Counsel early.
- Ensure procedural consistency and due process.
- Institutional pressure should not override contractual obligations or policy requirements.

Final Takeaways

- Accountability should never be a surprise.
- Clear expectations create fairness and consistency.
- Early conversations create opportunities for support and correction.
- Documentation should reflect reality – not frustration.
- Supervisors should focus on performance, communication, and accountability.
- Human Resources and Legal Counsel should be viewed as partners in the process.
- Complex employee situations require consistency, patience, and professional judgment.

Responsible leadership is not avoiding hard conversations - it is navigating them fairly, consistently, and thoughtfully.

