

Issue: Group I Written Notice (unsatisfactory performance); Hearing Date: 01/16/14;
Decision Issued: 02/06/14; Agency: VCU; AHO: John V. Robinson, Esq.; Case No.
10232; Outcome: No Relief – Agency Upheld.

COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
Department of Employment Dispute Resolution

DIVISION OF HEARINGS

In the matter of: Case No. 10232

Hearing Officer Appointment: December 2, 2013

Hearing Date: January 16, 2014

Decision Issued: February 6, 2014

PROCEDURAL HISTORY, ISSUES
AND PURPOSE OF HEARING

The Grievant requested an administrative due process hearing to challenge the issuance of a Group 1 Written Notice, issued July 18, 2013, by Management of a school within Virginia Commonwealth University (the "Department" or "Agency"), as described in the Grievance Form A dated August 16, 2013.

The parties duly participated in a first pre-hearing conference call scheduled by the hearing officer on December 18, 2013. The Grievant, the Department's advocate and the hearing officer participated in the call. The Grievant's confirmed the Grievant is seeking the relief requested in her Grievance Form A, namely, removal of the written notice. Following the pre-hearing conference call, the hearing officer issued a Scheduling Order entered on December 18, 2013 (the "Scheduling Order"), which is incorporated herein by this reference.

The hearing was scheduled for and held on January 16, 2014 at 10:00 a.m. The hearing officer used his own recording equipment and tapes.

At the hearing, the Grievant represented herself and the Advocate represented the Department. Both parties were given the opportunity to make opening and closing statements, to call witnesses and to cross-examine witnesses called by the other party. The hearing officer also received various documentary exhibits of the parties into evidence at the hearing¹.

No open issues concerning non-attendance of witnesses or non-production of documents remained by the conclusion of the hearing.

References to the grievant's exhibits will be designated GE followed by the exhibit number. References to the agency's exhibits will be designated AE followed by the exhibit number.

In this proceeding, the Agency bears the primary burden of proof and must show by a preponderance of the evidence that the discipline was warranted and appropriate under the circumstances. Of course, the Grievant bears the burden of proof concerning any affirmative defenses.

APPEARANCES

Representative for Agency
Grievant

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. The Grievant during the time relevant to these proceedings (the "Period") worked in the area of human resources as a personnel administrator managing, amongst other things recruitment, employment, data entry updates, contract letters, etc. GE8.
2. The Grievant's Supervisor stressed to the Grievant that certain contract renewal letters to be sent to faculty members needed to be correct. In the past, there had been issues with such letters which created problems for the Department. The Supervisor informed the Grievant from the beginning of the process "that it was crucial that you ensure the letters were accurate this year because there have been problems in the past, which [the Dean] has pointed out." AE 1, at 4.
3. In an effort to assist the Grievant in this process, the Supervisor reviewed figures in an Access database for accuracy, but cautioned the Grievant that she would not have the time to review each individual letter to be sent to the faculty members.
4. The database information was accurate but the Grievant experienced difficulty in merging into certain letters to individual faculty members required information relating to bonuses, merit increases and variable increases in salary. As a result, the Grievant sent out to certain faculty members incorrect salary letters, which again caused problems for the Department.
5. For performance issues, the Grievant has previously received from the Supervisor three notices of improvement needed and additional verbal counselings. AE 3 & 5.
6. The Grievant has received significant support and training from the Agency.

7. The testimony of the Agency witness was credible. The demeanor of such witness was open, frank and forthright

APPLICABLE LAW, ANALYSIS AND DECISION

The General Assembly enacted the *Virginia Personnel Act, Va. Code* § 2.2-2900 et seq., establishing the procedures and policies applicable to employment within the Commonwealth. This comprehensive legislation includes procedures for hiring, promoting, compensating, discharging and training state employees. It also provides for a grievance procedure. The Act balances the need for orderly administration of state employment and personnel practices with the preservation of the employee's ability to protect his rights and to pursue legitimate grievances. These dual goals reflect a valid governmental interest in and responsibility to its employees and workplace. *Murray v. Stokes*, 237 Va. 653, 656 (1989).

Va. Code § 2.2-3000(A) sets forth the Commonwealth's grievance procedure and provides, in pertinent part:

It shall be the policy of the Commonwealth, as an employer, to encourage the resolution of employee problems and complaints . . . To the extent that such concerns cannot be resolved informally, the grievance procedure shall afford an immediate and fair method for the resolution of employment disputes which may arise between state agencies and those employees who have access to the procedure under § 2.2-3001.

In disciplinary actions, the Agency must show by a preponderance of evidence that the disciplinary action was warranted and appropriate under the circumstances. *Grievance Procedure Manual*, § 5.8.

To establish procedures on Standards of Conduct and Performance for employees of the Commonwealth of Virginia and pursuant to § 2.2-1201 of the *Code of Virginia*, the Department of Human Resource Management promulgated Standards of Conduct Policy No. 1.60, (the "SOC"). AE 4. The SOC provide a set of rules governing the professional and personal conduct and acceptable standards for work performance of employees. The SOC serve to establish a fair and objective process for correcting or treating unacceptable conduct or work performance, to distinguish between less serious and more serious actions of misconduct and to provide appropriate corrective action.

The task of managing the affairs and operations of state government, including supervising and managing the Commonwealth's employees, belongs to agency management which has been charged by the legislature with that critical task. *See, e.g., Rules for Conducting Grievance Hearings*, § VI; *DeJarnette v. Corning*, 133 F.3d 293, 299 (4th Cir. 1988).

Pursuant to DHRM Policy No. 1.60, the Grievant's conduct could clearly constitute unsatisfactory performance and a Group 1 offense as asserted by the Agency. AE 4. This was particularly the case where similar problems had occurred in the past and the Grievant had been

counseled and received three notices of improvement needed in keeping with the Agency's prerogative of progressive discipline.

As previously stated, the Agency's burden is to show upon a preponderance of evidence that the discipline was warranted and appropriate under the circumstances. The hearing officer agrees with the Agency's advocate that the Grievant's disciplinary infractions justified the issuance by Management of a Group 1 Written Notice. Accordingly, the Grievant's behavior constituted misconduct and the Agency's discipline is consistent with law and consistent with policy, being properly characterized as a Group 1 offense.

EDR's *Rules for Conducting Grievance Hearings* provide in part:

DHRM's *Standards of Conduct* allows agencies to reduce the disciplinary action if there are "mitigating circumstances" such as "conditions that would compel a reduction in the disciplinary action to promote the interests of fairness and objectivity; or ... an employee's long service, or otherwise satisfactory work performance."

If the Department does not consider mitigating factors, the hearing officer should not show any deference to the Department in his mitigation analysis. In this proceeding the Department apparently did consider mitigating factors in disciplining the Grievant.

While the Grievant did not specifically raise mitigation in the hearing or in her Form A and while the Grievant might not have specified for the hearing officer's mitigation analysis all of the mitigating factors below, the hearing officer considered a number of factors including those specifically referenced herein and all of those listed below in his analysis:

1. the Grievant's service to the Agency of approximately 7 years;
2. the Grievant's demanding workload; and
3. the Grievant received many positive evaluations. GE 8.

EDR has previously ruled that it will be an extraordinary case in which an employee's length of service and/or past work experience could adequately support a finding by a hearing officer that a disciplinary action exceeded the limits of reasonableness. EDR Ruling No. 2008-1903; EDR Ruling No. 2007-1518; and EDR Ruling 2010-2368. The weight of an employee's length of service and past work performance will depend largely on the facts of each case, and will be influenced greatly by the extent, nature, and quality of the employee's service, and how it relates and compares to the seriousness of the conduct charged. The more serious the charges, the less significant length of service and otherwise satisfactory work performance become. *!d.*

Clearly, the hearing officer would not be acting responsibly or appropriately if he were to reduce the discipline under the circumstances of this proceeding particularly where the Agency appropriately exercised its prerogative of progressive discipline.

The task of managing the affairs and operations of state government, including supervising and managing the Commonwealth's employees, belongs to agency management which has been charged by the legislature with that critical task. *See, e.g., Rules for Conducting Grievance Hearings*, § VI; *DeJarnette v. Corning*, 133 F.3d 293, 299 (4th Cir. 1988).

Pursuant to DHRM Policy 1.60, Standards of Conduct, and the SOC, management is given the specific power to take corrective action ranging from informal action such as counseling to formal disciplinary action to address employment problems such as unacceptable behavior. Accordingly, as long as representatives of agency management act in accordance with law and policy, they deserve latitude in managing the affairs and operations of state government and have a right to apply their professional judgment without being easily second-guessed by a hearing officer. In short, a hearing officer is not a "super-personnel officer" and must be careful not to succumb to the temptation to substitute his judgment for that of an agency's management concerning personnel matters absent some statutory, policy or other infraction by management. *Id.*

In this proceeding, the Agency's actions were consistent with law and policy and, accordingly, the exercise of such professional judgment and expertise warrants appropriate deference from the hearing officer.

In EDR Case No. 8975 involving the University of Virginia ("UVA"), a grievant received a Group III Written Notice with removal for falsifying records on five (5) separate dates. Although the evidence supported only one of those instances, the hearing officer upheld the disciplinary action. The grievant appealed to EDR asserting that the disciplinary action was inappropriate in that the grievant did not engage in as much misconduct as alleged by UVA. The Director upheld the hearing officer's decision:

The grievant's arguments essentially contest the hearing officer's determinations of fact as they relate to the proper sanction for the misconduct. Such determinations are within the hearing officer's authority as the hearing officer considers the facts *de novo* to determine whether the disciplinary action was appropriate. In this case, while it appears that the hearing officer did find that the grievant did not engage in as much misconduct as alleged by the University, it was still determined that the grievant had falsified a state record with the requisite intent, generally a Group III offense under the Standards of Conduct. [footnote omitted] Upon review of the record, there is no indication that the hearing officer abused his discretion in making these findings or that the facts were not supported by the hearing record. Consequently, this Department has no basis to disturb the hearing decision.

EDR Ruling Number 2009-2192; February 6, 2009.

The hearing officer decides for each offense specified in the written notice (i) the Grievant engaged in the behavior described in the written notice; (ii) the behavior constituted misconduct; (iii) the Department's discipline was consistent with law and policy and that there are no mitigating circumstances justifying a further reduction or removal of the disciplinary action.

DECISION

The Agency has sustained its burden of proof in this proceeding and the action of the Agency in issuing the written notice and concerning all issues grieved in this proceeding is affirmed as warranted and appropriate under the circumstances. Accordingly, the Agency's action concerning the Grievant is hereby upheld, having been shown by the Agency, by a preponderance of the evidence, to be warranted by the facts and consistent with law and policy.

APPEAL RIGHTS

As the *Grievance Procedure Manual* sets forth in more detail, this hearing decision is subject to administrative and judicial review. Once the administrative review phase has concluded, the hearing decision becomes final and is subject to judicial review.

Administrative Review: This decision is subject to two types of administrative review, depending upon the nature of the alleged defect of the decision:

1. A challenge that the hearing decision is inconsistent with state or agency policy is made to the Director of the Department of Human Resources Management. This request must refer to a particular mandate in state or agency policy. The Director's authority is limited to ordering the hearing officer to revise the decision to conform it to written policy. Requests should be sent to the Director of the Department of Human Resources Management, 101 N. 14th Street, 12th Floor, Richmond, Virginia 23219 or faxed to (804) 371-7401 ore-mailed.
2. A challenge that the hearing decision does not comply with grievance procedure as well as a request to present newly discovered evidence is made to EDR. This request must refer to a specific requirement of the grievance procedure with which the decision is not in compliance. EDR's authority is limited to ordering the hearing officer to revise the decision so that it complies with the grievance procedure. Requests should be sent to the Office of Employment Dispute Resolution, 101 N. 14th Street, 12th Floor, Richmond, Virginia 23219, faxed ore-mailed to EDR.

A party may make more than one type of request for review. All requests for review must be made in writing, and received by the administrative reviewer, within **15 calendar** days of the **date of original hearing decision**. (Note: the 15-day period, in which the appeal must occur, begins with the date of **issuance** of the decision, **not receipt** of the decision. However, the date the decision is rendered does not count as one of the 15 days; the day following the issuance of the decision is the first of the 15 days.) A copy of each appeal must be provided to the other party.

A hearing officer's original decision becomes a **final hearing decision**, with no further possibility of an administrative review, when:

1. The 15 calendar day period for filing requests for administrative review has expired and neither party has filed such a request; or
2. All timely requests for administrative review have been decided and, if ordered by EDR or DHRM, the hearing officer has issued a revised decision.

Judicial Review of Final Hearing Decision: Within thirty days of a final decision, a party may appeal on the grounds that the determination is contradictory to law by filing a notice of appeal with the clerk of the circuit court in the jurisdiction in which the grievance arose. The agency shall request and receive prior approval of EDR before filing a notice of appeal.

ENTER:
2/06/14

John V. Robinson, Hearing Officer

cc: Each of the persons on the Attached Distribution List (by U.S. Mail and e-mail transmission where possible and as appropriate, pursuant to *Grievance Procedure Manual*, § 5.9).