Interpersonal skills in the workplace: Case Studies

The following are fictional cases from work places and some of the experiences and challenges faced there. The examples are meant to be representative of the kinds of experiences reported by students in past and current years.

Case 1:
During the first week on the job, the intern is preparing for the farmers market by making signage, packing materials, and learning about the produce being sold. At the first market, the intern is asked to help with cash sales, answer questions from customers about the farming practices, and suggest other products (eggs, honey, meat, cheese) can be purchased or meal ideas. The intern would consistently say that they “did not know” in response to questions from customers and eventually, stood back from the table and avoided making eye contact. As more and more customers relied on fewer staff members to answer questions and complete their purchases, a long line of customers grew. Eventually, people walked away from the table to visit other vendors. Some did not return. While this was going on, the intern stood back behind the other staff and started checking their phone. The supervisor asked the intern to take over the cash register. Unsure of all the prices, the intern would ask customers how much certain produce was as they processed their orders and charge them accordingly. At the end of the day, the cash flow did not equal the produce sold.

The supervisor had a one-on-one conversation with the intern. During that conversation, the following patterns emerged:

- The intern did not want to provide incorrect information to customers about the produce and negatively impact the reputation of the organization. When the intern did offer information to customers it was often somewhat inaccurate, but more importantly, it was not consistent with the messages that the farm had provided during the preliminary training and orientation.
- As a result of asking customers to name their price, they had overcharged some customers and undercharged others leading to inconsistent expectations for customers. For new customers, this meant that future trips to purchase the same products would cost more money and they might feel skeptical about the value of the produce from the farm. For regular customers, those who had overpaid may feel entitled to lower prices in the future to compensate for this discrepancy.
- The intern restated throughout the conversation that they “didn’t know” what was expected of them and they “didn’t want to be wrong”.
- The intern wanted to appear busy when they were on their phone, but the two other staff later stated that they felt it was unfair for them to work while another person was taking a break. They stated that they didn’t want to be rude or make the intern feel uncomfortable, but that this kind of behavior was unacceptable to them.

Which course of action would have been most effective at alleviating the problems experienced in Case 1? And WHY?
A. Ask for more training on farming practices, cash handling, and how to provide customer service at the market.
B. Commit to doing better at the next market in a conversation with your supervisor. After the meeting, create a plan for how to do better in this job. Start enacting it.
C. Reflect on the conversation. What made the intern uncomfortable. How might others perceive this behavior? What impact does that perception have? Does that align with how the intern wants to be seen? Why or why not? What might the intern change in their behavior to demonstrate their values?
D. Ask the supervisor for some time to think and follow up on this conversation in the near future. After thinking, come prepared with concrete questions to ask about how to improve your work and observations to share. Ask to collaborate on an action plan and set goals for your performance.
E. Talk to others, such as friends, family, and colleagues about the internship to get advice on what you could do to improve your performance. Apply their advice when and where possible.
**Case 2:**

Two weeks later, the intern is responsible for weeding invasive species and leaving some native plants that are naturally returning to the soil. After clear instructions and plant identification, the intern nods and agrees that they are ready to begin and able to finish the area that they have been tasked with. Once the intern has started, the intern notices how time consuming the method of weeding is that they have been asked to use. The native plants are hard to see and rare. It makes more sense to weed faster since there are many invasive species taking over, and the intern wants to prove that they are efficient and effective in their job. The intern clears the area they are responsible for and hasn’t found any of the small native plants. After completing the task, the supervisor asks how it went and states that they are surprised at how quickly the work was finished.

The next day, the supervisor has had a chance to walk through the area the intern was weeding and notices that not a single native plant was saved. When the supervisor approaches the intern to discuss this with them, the intern states that they “forgot” about the native plants, and “there weren’t any there anyways.” The intern then shares that they offered to help another person with their area and weeded more than was assigned in an effort to be helpful. The supervisor asks which areas specifically the intern worked in and finds that no native plants were saved.

When the intern is given responsibilities, the following pattern emerges:
- The intern often agrees verbally and nods while listening to instructions, but does not ask questions or for clarification about the procedures until the intern is corrected by a colleague or the supervisor.
- The intern is usually the first to finish a task but the supervisor often asks for certain steps to be repeated or reviewed. The supervisor and the intern do not consistently agree about when work is completed or which tasks need to be prioritized over others in order to ensure high quality and demonstrate a strong work ethic.
- In the absence of step-by-step instructions from the supervisor, the intern creates the most efficient method for completing their tasks, even if that doesn’t utilize some of the applicable skills or practices the supervisor has trained the intern to use.

**Which course of action would have been most effective at alleviating the problems experienced in Case 2? And WHY?**

A. The supervisor needs to initiate a conversation about the intern’s performance and provide the intern with feedback about their performance.
B. The intern should initiate a meeting with the supervisor to provide some feedback to the supervisor and let them know that their directions are not always clear, and that they should be providing more detailed instructions more often.
C. At the start of the next assignment, the intern should clarify the task with the supervisor including the steps involved and what each step entails and how long each step should take.
D. At the start of the next assignment, the intern could speak with the supervisor one-on-one and discuss which parts of the assignment to prioritize and identify who could answer questions during the process. If needed, the intern and supervisor could complete a small example together, so that they both have the same understanding of the task.
E. The intern needs to ask for a partner to work with, so that they can check-in more consistently on their progress and hold each other accountable for completing their work properly and thoroughly.

**Case 3:**

At the end of the third week of the internship, the intern is still primarily weeding while other people have been given other tasks. The supervisor has been busy with competing priorities and has not been able to talk with the intern all week. When the supervisor does check-in with the intern, they find out that the intern has not been able to complete the tasks that were set out by the supervisor (e.g., weeding, watering, mixing compost, etc.). The supervisor asks the intern what has been accomplished, but the intern doesn’t have much to share. As the supervisor asks more questions, the intern states that they wanted to be doing more complex work and learning more skills. When the supervisor asks the intern to clarify the skills or projects that they’d rather be
working on, the intern responds by asking what options are available and cannot name the skills they’d like to build on through the internship. The intern restates that they didn’t think the tasks of weeding, etc, were tasks they should be completing as part of their internship.

The follow discrepancies emerge:
- According to the supervisor’s perspective, the intern is still learning how to properly complete the initial tasks that were assigned.
- According to the intern’s perspective, the tasks they are responsible for do not provide adequate complexity to be worth the intern’s time.

**Which course of action would have been most effective at alleviating the problems experienced in Case 3? And WHY?**

A. The intern needs to email the professor of the course and state that the internship isn’t as challenging as it should be. The professor can intervene with the employer and make sure that the internship is high quality.
B. The supervisor should advance the intern’s responsibilities to ensure that the intern gets the most learning out of the internship possible.
C. The intern and supervisor could outline what steps the intern needs to take before taking on additional responsibilities.
D. The intern should reflect on their experience so far, identify what benefits and strengths have been developed through the work experience so far, and identify a few options for new skills or projects to discuss with the supervisor.
E. The supervisor should keep the intern doing this work until they’ve “paid their dues” and mastered the skills required before moving on to more complex responsibilities and tasks.