

The Frontline Supervisor

**Publication of Wayne Corporation
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Q. Some employees are very up front about personal problems. I know we should not give advice or counsel employees, but I think too much listening can also be problematic. So, how much should a supervisor listen to employees' problems?

A. There are two problematic issues associated with listening to employees who bring their personal problems to you as their supervisor: one is giving advice, and the other is having too much information about their personal problems. The more information you possess about an employee's situation, the more responsibility you have to consider it when making decisions. And don't be fooled, the more you know, the more likely it is that information will affect your feelings about the employee. Judgments about how to manage performance will be affected. Some personal problems employees possess can be associated with disabilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and knowing about those problems places you in the position of having to act properly to give them due consideration. Supervisors must listen to employees, but they must also learn the art of cutting a conversation short (for example, by using language such as "Jim, I get the picture. Let me recommend that you visit with the EAP," and "let me give you the number," or "here, use my phone, so you can make an appointment").

Q. I believe I manage my own stress on the job well and stay positive with the health habits I've established. However, my employees are really stressed. I hesitate to overwhelm the EAP by referring them all. What role can I play to support my employees and reduce their stress?

A. There are several ways stress can exhibit itself in the work setting. Most stress falls within three manifestations: daily strain, burnout, and disengagement. Each type of stress can benefit from different interventions. The EAP can consult with you on what role you might play in responding to any of them. Daily work strain responds best to health habits that mitigate stress, including diet, exercise, proper breaks, and stress management techniques that build resilience. In this regard, there is nothing improper in your sharing tips and successes you have experienced in managing stress. In fact, it is a good idea, because a positive attitude is contagious, and modeling is a powerful way to influence your team. Always encourage employees to use the EAP, individually and in group presentations, staff meetings, and the like. No matter how many employees contact the EAP, they will be accommodated.

Q. I saw the word "fear-based workplace" on a LinkedIn post. What does this mean, and how can I avoid unwittingly establishing such a problematic work environment for my employees?

A. An article from Bloomberg and NBC News went viral several years ago. Searching for “ten signs you work in a fear-based workplace” will show many links mentioning it. The article discusses toxic characteristics of an unhealthy work environment and more importantly, what makes for a healthy work environment. In fear-based workplaces, employees seek to satisfy management at the most superficial levels, such as working overtime just so they can be seen doing it. Gossip and warnings of “watch your back” are common. Distrust is common. The emphasis is on what’s expected today, not the successes of yesterday. There are overly strict policies for time off, vacations, and sick leave. Fear-based workplaces do not trust employees and seek to control communication using a strict top-down model. You won’t achieve good sharing of information in these types of organizations because information is secreted or hoarded. Employees become “survivors.” Fear-based workplaces destroy creativity because they restrict spontaneity. The key message in fear-based workplaces is: Be thankful you still have a job.

Q. I know my role as a manager includes promoting a positive workplace and championing diversity. How can I understand this role better and know where to begin?

A. Get a lay of the land by taking time to observe the work environment for several weeks. Make it a conscious effort. This will produce insight and help you focus more specifically on how you might engage employees as time goes by. Discuss your observations with your own manager and even the EAP. You will discover that your best resource for demonstrating the value of diversity is you—that is, your modeling appropriate and validating behaviors. Observe employee interactions, lack of interaction, how employees group or isolate themselves, types of communication, body language, and social interactions. Consider reading the book “Cultural Competence for Public Managers.” The book is a rich source of information, ideas, and direction. The supervisor is a powerful agent for influencing change, and one person can make a difference.

Q. How can the EAP help me maintain high morale among my employees?

A. Maintaining high morale is like tending to a garden. There are many things that go into it, however, having a keen awareness of your behavior and its impact on employees is by far the most important thing. Why? Employees almost always blame poor morale on the one in charge. Some of the most common behavioral complaints voiced by employees include that a supervisor is exercising too much control, being a micromanager, having a lousy disposition (irritability), rejecting ideas from subordinates or not giving them a fair hearing, creating fear among employees, and playing favorites when giving out cushy assignments. There are many more examples, but almost always, the underlying cause of low morale is explained by the supervisor’s behaviors. The EAP can help you examine your supervision style and how to improve it. The promise is reduced stress and more job satisfaction for everyone, including you.

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