

The Frontline Supervisor

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Q. I read that January 25, 2016, will be the most depressing day of the year. Why is this true? Does it have any implications for supervisors in managing employees?

A. The specific date changes year to year, but the third Monday in January has been coined Blue Monday. There is nothing scientific about this day being the most depressing day of the year, but nevertheless it has a useful purpose, that being to help people become more aware of depression, its symptoms, and its treatability. The hope in promoting the day is to inspire those needing help to get it. The day was created by a researcher who pointed out that this day represents the gloomiest day because (in the northern hemisphere) it has minimal sunlight, plenty of cold and gloomy weather, and holiday bills coming due—all of those compounded by New Year's resolutions that have been broken since January 1. The day is a good one for employees to be reminded that the EAP is available and for supervisors to be reminded they should consider referrals as needed.

Q. Most people think of enabling as protecting a worker by covering up for mistakes, loaning money, making excuses, and other classic examples. What other enabling behaviors do supervisors exhibit that may be more subtle? Also, what drives these enabling behaviors?

A. Most supervisors' enabling behaviors serve one overriding purpose—to decrease the stress of the supervisor's job by minimizing the perceived severity of the behavioral issues the employee exhibits. To show how veiled yet potent these enabling behaviors can be, consider the following: (1) downplaying inappropriate behavior; (2) ignoring red flags that signal there may be trouble; (3) being agreeable, accepting excuses, and not making waves; (4) minimizing a troubled employee's problems when speaking with one's superiors; (5) giving reassurances to employees when they come to discuss personal problems that signal a need for referral to the EAP; and (6) doing extra work to help out because of the employee's inability to perform.

Q. How can I do a better job of holding my employees accountable?

A. Most supervisors know that accountability includes having employees answer for their results. But it means a lot more. Accountability is not just an after-the-fact assignment of credit or blame. It is a workplace expectation in the forefront of everyone's minds and ideal when it is part of the work culture. A culture of accountability is not difficult to establish, but you have to nurture it. It starts with defining accountability at the most basic level so that no employee is confused about his or her role in the organization or what it takes to do outstanding work. With this clarity, employees are compelled to reach for outstanding results and want the same from their coworkers. Think of it as a pull strategy rather than a push strategy for results. Meeting with employees to troubleshoot barriers to achievement propels them to accomplish more. Later, holding employees accountable with proper

rewards or consequences completes the loop. Accountability can backfire when a foundation for it has not been laid so that employees resent accountability and supervisors are hesitant to assign it.

Q. I don't want performance of my employees to suffer if a personal problem does not get resolved with help from the EAP. If I have ideas and advice to share that can help the employee, shouldn't I play this role, offering advice or counsel to protect the bottom line?

A. A supervisor can be very knowledgeable about an employee's personal problem, including how it originated, its historical progression, and perhaps where it will lead. It's tempting to step in and offer your counsel, but pass information and knowledge to the EAP so your role as a supervisor does not become one of dual purpose—insisting on accountability, while also advocating tolerance and patience. When this happens, employees choose the role you will play, and it is predictably the latter one. This will lead to postponing important decisions crucial to maintaining workplace productivity, which will affect the bottom line. Talk to the EAP. The professional will consider your recommendations, and they are more apt to be followed.

Q. How do I get two employees whose personalities clash severely to get along? The EAP is great, but I think these two are beyond help. These employees have significant differences in their backgrounds, energy levels, values, attitudes, work styles, and more.

A. Despite the serious differences between your employees, it is not practical or possible to say all hope is lost. Realize that employees in severe conflict usually evolve to the point of impasse they are experiencing. The conflict may appear to be an instant phenomenon, but typically unacceptable behavior, sabotage, withholding information, territorial disputes, and complete unwillingness to sit down and iron out problems come with time. What fuels growth of this toxic relationship is a lack of consequences perceived by the warring parties for continuing their dispute. Indeed, managers often back off, tolerate the conflict, hope for the best, and only intermittently get involved during brief crises. Your first step is to meet with the EAP to discuss the problem privately. Then examine your commitment to making improvement of the working relationship nonnegotiable, plan the referral, and make decisions about how you will respond should a resolution not be forthcoming. Predictably, both employees would like to be in less pain. This reality offers strong assurance that the EAP will be able to help.

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