

The Frontline Supervisor

**Publication of Wayne Corporation
Employee Assistance Program
(502) 451-8262 or (800) 441-1327
E-mail: info@waynecorp.com
Website address: www.waynecorp.com**

Q. We talk a lot about helping troubled employees, but what are some of the most common behaviors of troubled supervisors that negatively affect employees? If I am aware of what they are, perhaps I can intervene before they become habits.

A. Troubling behaviors of supervisors can be costly for organizations, which is why there is typically much deliberation regarding their hiring. Troubled supervisors have a multiplier effect because they have influence over others and work systems. We've all heard of bosses who are bullies or those who were catalysts for workplace violence. Some employees become severely depressed over supervisory practices, and you've heard the phrase, "Employees don't leave companies; they leave supervisors." This refers to the high cost of turnover. The Workplace Bullying Institute reports that 44% of workers have had an abusive boss. The behaviors cited by employees as the most painful and disruptive were sarcastic jokes, public criticism of job performance, interrupting a worker in a rude manner, yelling or raising one's voice, and ignoring an employee as if he or she were invisible. Empathize with the victim of these behaviors to help avoid them.

Q. How can I coach my employee, who is very competitive, to be less arrogant when interacting with coworkers during staff meetings? He rubs people the wrong way, but frankly, I like his take-no-prisoners mentality toward achieving our sales goals.

A. Since your work unit or department is dedicated to maximizing sales, understand that the workplace can play a role in creating a high-energy work environment. This is not necessarily a bad thing for sales. Employees who are competitive will naturally feel revved up and behave accordingly. So, the discussion to have with your employee is about restraint. His behavior is out of place for the office setting. If not controlled, it can contribute to a toxic work environment. Is your employee ambitious or arrogant? Consider your personal reaction to ambitious behavior so you don't mislabel it as arrogance. If your employee acts and behaves as though he is better than others are, you have a basis for correcting the behavior or making a referral to the EAP if the difficult behavior continues.

Q. My employee is not happy in her job. There is no place in the organization where she can be transferred. What can I do before suggesting an EAP referral? Being unhappy isn't a performance problem, so is an EAP appropriate? Should I coach her to leave?

A. Sit down with your employee and find out what is causing her to appear so unhappy in her job. Document this discussion. There are perhaps a hundred reasons employees become unhappy, and they can range from not knowing what they are doing to having various medical or behavioral health problems. It is true that unhappiness alone is not a performance problem.

However, the behavior or attitude associated with being unhappy can still affect the work environment, her initiative, and her demeanor, and can create an unsupportive work environment that adversely affects coworkers and their productivity. If you can't make headway on work-related issues first, consult with the EAP. Together, you may discover ideas to help renew her enthusiasm for the position. Make the EAP referral if these first steps do not produce the results you need to help her become a fully functioning member of your team.

Q. What is the difference between being a good manager and being a good leader? Can EAPs help with leadership issues, or is this development of leaders more of an education and training process apart from what EAPs do?

A. Peter Drucker, known as “the father of modern management” once said, “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.” This adage has meaning for nearly all supervisors because you will have the opportunity to play both roles at some point. Leadership is not just a few people at the top making all the decisions. It’s an organizational process. Many supervisors are not used to thinking like leaders, and a lack of definition can make leadership sound mysterious. The key is viewing those under your supervision not as individuals with specific functions you monitor, but as part of an orchestra of talent and potential that you escort or shepherd to achievement. This view of leadership places the emphasis on the team’s success to define your own success. The EAP is an excellent resource for helping you look in the “leadership mirror” to see potential roadblocks in your approach to leadership that keep you from connecting with your team the way you envision.

Q. How can I be more assertive with the help of the EAP? I avoid certain employees I do not like to supervise. These are difficult personalities, and I know I need to change this coping style because it is creating unspoken tension. I can feel it.

A. To start being assertive, understand the value in practicing it. Without assertiveness you participate in laissez-faire management, which means you are supporting a policy or attitude of letting things take their own course without interference. This usually has only one result—things spiral out of control. Most supervisors are not completely unassertive. Instead, assertiveness is selective. Reinforcement of undesirable employee behaviors, however, happens by default without assertiveness. The good news is that assertiveness is easier to learn than most people think because there are mechanics, word phrases, and sentence structures that can be tested and their results experienced. Find assertive language you can practice, watch the result, make a tweak, and try again. Eventually you will see results. EAPs are pros at helping employees, including supervisors, be assertive. The EA professional will help you get started, process the outcomes of your attempts, and make forward progress.

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Edited and formatted by Kimberly Carter, Administrative Assistant, Wayne Corporation