

The Frontline Supervisor



Quality Employee Assistance Programs.

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Q. How can a supervisor become less fearful of confronting an employee whose performance is unsatisfactory? I think many of us live in denial, or rationalize avoidance of this unpleasant task. We want to be leaders, but this responsibility is the most distasteful. How can the EAP help?

A. Most supervisors temporarily get away with ignoring employees who are not performing satisfactorily. Unfortunately, however, such problems grow worse, as do the risks they present. Helping supervisors understand the chronic nature of unresolved personnel issues can create an urgency to act sooner, before a crisis makes confrontation unavoidable. Shy supervisors usually are unaware of the secondary problems associated with poor performance. Failure by employees to follow work rules and disregard for one's professional development are examples. Supervisors' reluctance to confront employees is often based on fear. This might be fear of being lashed out at by the employee, disliked, or labeled unfair. The reticent supervisor's goal is to avoid an undeserved reputation as an oppressor. If this sounds familiar, contact the EAP for counseling and support, and practice some tough role plays with the EA professional. You will be astonished at how such exercises can enhance one's fortitude to act.

Q. I don't want to be the cause of my employees burning out, but there is no way I can distribute less work to them. Can you offer tips for how to balance these issues? Any hard data to back up those tips?

A. When discussing burnout, it is important to describe what the term means, given the context of the work situation. A report from the National Institute of Health in 2017 reminds us that burnout is not an official mental health diagnosis, that the definitions are drastically non-uniform across research studies, and that many symptoms included in these definitions are also associated with depression. So, who is burned out and who is not is not easy to determine. A recent Gallup survey of German workers may have discovered an answer that will help you in considering how to engage with your workers. Those who received regular praise and recognition for good work, had proper materials and equipment to deliver quality work, and felt their opinion counted had lower feelings of burnout. How much control do you have over these factors? It appears that most supervisors have a quite a bit. Source: www.gallup.com [search: "German Workforce Stress"].

Q. I have an employee who behaves as if he "knows" everything. Other employees suppress their opinions around him, so I miss their input on issues that need to be resolved. The tricky part is that he really is smart, but how do I address a problem like this?

A. It is difficult for some supervisors to imagine that a very smart employee with significant skills and major contributions could also be a problem employee. This is an example of the "halo effect." This can make it a

challenge to confront an employee about conduct issues. Obviously, it takes more than intelligence to be effective in the workplace. It also takes teamwork, soft skills, and emotional intelligence — the ability to recognize others' needs and feelings and use this information effectively. These skills appear lacking or unapplied in this instance. You can quantify the effect that your employee's behavior, conduct, and attitude have on others. You also can observe behaviors that lead to these effects. This is all you need in order to compose the effective documentation necessary to discuss and counsel your employee. Meet with the EAP, however, for consultative help on pulling these pieces together in a way that will be effective when you sit down to discuss the issues and make changes.

Q. I am new to my leadership role. Can I learn leadership skills from a book, or is leadership too complex? Is it an art form or the product of some creative process? What role can the EAP play?

A. Much of leadership is learned from the school of "hard knocks," but it is also an art and a science, as many books attest. Literature may increase desire and excitement for your new role, but it won't shorten the learning curve of practical experience. Some principles that can help you shape your own style are worth hearing. Be clear with employees about what you want from them — don't let them wonder about it. Offer a vision about what success looks like that they can grasp. Doing so will cause employees to establish standards of performance modeled after your examples. Never allow employees to think they aren't accountable, and be liberal with praise and celebrate successes. Be consistent with your employees by not confusing them with different or muted reactions to problems and concerns. Employees will march to the rhythm you set and this will influence the work culture. Don't let your leadership style develop accidentally. Make this a conscious process.

Q. What's the most important thing a manager can do to help prevent workplace violence?

A. Instructing supervisors in spotting signs and symptoms of potential violence, promoting fair work practices, and resolving conflicts are strong "to dos" in helping managers prevent workplace violence. However, the most effective overarching piece of advice is "get to know your employees." This requires possessing or developing a natural sense of curiosity, aided by a strong belief that employees are your most valuable resource. Whether you discover employees being bullied, feeling treated unfairly, facing domestic conflict, not bonding with coworkers, suffering from depression, or even showing signs of being under the influence, a supervisor has numerous opportunities to discover smaller issues that can lead to tragedy down the road. And, of course, the EAP is always there as a resource you can encourage employees to use.

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