

Frontline Supervisor



EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE OFFICE (EAO) – 608/263-2987 – www.wisc.edu/eao

■ My best employee is also my worst. He is an excellent producer with poor interpersonal skills. He's smart, but his demeanor makes others feel stupid. Employees don't like him because of his "I'm better than you" attitude. I'm concerned he'd reject a formal EAO referral.

■ How can I keep conflict within our team from having a negative impact on the workplace?

■ Employees are taking off more time from work as the holidays approach, and the result is stress for other workers. What can

If you decide to refer this employee to the EAO, you need to get your documentation right. Keep track of your employee's interactions. Record employee complaints, and take notes on when interactions occurred and what complaints were directly shared with you. Meet with the EAO first. The confidential consult will help you decide on an effective approach, which will at first be a corrective interview. You mention the employee's "demeanor," or the way he behaves, which gives people an impression of his character and feelings. The impression he gives is unproductive and negative. This is the leverage you need as a basis for the eventual referral. Prior to making an informal but strongly encouraged referral, role play with an EAO consultant the resistance you may face to increase the likelihood of success. A time may come for a formal referral. If so, don't hesitate.

Two often-forgotten truths about teams are that conflict is normal and that teams must meet. To prevent team conflicts from having a negative impact on the work place, have a regular meeting to address staff concerns so they are resolved early, while they're small and manageable. Knowing that they have such a forum to air conflicts and internal issues will reduce the likelihood that frustrated team members will act out. Start with weekly meetings if employees interact with one another daily. Discuss content issues first (information, scheduling, reports, etc.) and process issues second (communication, clarification of roles, frustrations, conflicts). In the second part of your meeting, ask the group to discuss process and issues or concerns among members. Next, move to concerns about roles and duties. Also discuss concerns associated with the larger organization or needed resources. As problems resolve, you will see meetings shorten. Start meetings on time, and always give the opportunity for the "process" discussions, even if weeks or months pass without staff raising concerns.

Your first intervention when helping employees manage holiday stress is asking, "What do you need from me?" Two things will happen as a result. One, employees will tell you how they feel and ask for what they need, and two, when things do get stressful, you and the organization are less likely to be seen as antagonistic. Workplaces need rules, but is there

supervisors do to help employees manage holiday stress?

room to flex things a bit? Involve your employees in a discussion about how that might work. They'll come up with great ideas. The whole idea is to "loosen the ropes." Can you relax deadlines? If so, it's another option for relieving stress. For more ideas on ways to address stress, contact your EAO.

■ What can the supervisor do to help increase trust among a team of co-workers?

They say trust is like a lubricant in a relationship. When it exists, communication increases, ideas flow better, and productivity improves. Trust building begins with you, so start connecting with individual employees one at a time. Share small but not overly intimate details about yourself, and you'll be viewed as more real and approachable. Employees will naturally begin communicating with others in kind, thereby increasing trust between each other. The more you spend time with your employees, the more you'll see this rub off. Offer a positive and optimistic attitude toward your employees' ability to succeed. Find ways to make success happen. Admit mistakes, and employees will appreciate you. It's hard, but it's powerful. Not admitting mistakes throws your relationship into reverse. The payoff for admitting mistakes is appreciation. Give credit and praise when you see the opportunity, and make it authentic. Employees want to count for something. Consider that need, and you'll build trust that lasts.

■ Is it possible to teach leadership skills to employees?

Some people are born leaders, but any employee can learn leadership skills. Leadership skills vary widely, so try to fit experiences to the right positions. Not all employees need to learn financial spreadsheet analysis, but organizing a work team and then encouraging and leading it might be ideal for them. Leadership skills empower employees to be more effective on the job and in their personal lives. Learning such skills grows a mindset as much as it does the skills. The payoffs are employees who are proactive, forward-thinking, and solution-focused. Develop employees by helping them choose work goals, stay on task, mark their own progress, and pursue their goals to completion. Engage them with feedback, both positive and negative. Help them celebrate accomplishments and share the credit with others who make contributions. Also teach even entry-level employees, who often aren't made aware of their specific and important contributions to a large organizational mission, to have a vision of what they can accomplish in their unique roles. Recommended reading: "Millennials into Leadership (2011)."

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