

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



Employee Assistance Office (EAO) – 608-263-2987 – www.eao.wisc.edu

■ **My employee isn't insubordinate when I make a request, but there are always complaints, resistance to details, problems with timing, and criticism about my communication. After all this, the employee delivers superior performance. How can I manage this?**

Although your employee is great with a task, you are not describing superior performance. Quarrelsome behavior interferes with orderly workflow and is, therefore, serious. These kinds of communication patterns between managers and subordinates are not unusual. They can take years to develop and can become habits that are difficult to break. They are comparable to the bickering communication patterns found between spouses, and over time the psychology that influences them can be similar. Still, you may agree that the relationship is valued. Beyond requiring that the quarrelsome behavior stop, establish new rules that must be followed. But the most important part of your strategy is looking at how you contribute to its perpetuation and deciding whether you want change enough to follow through. Consider using the EAO for some coaching assistance.

■ **My employee was coming to work late every day. I finally decided to transfer her to the three to eleven o'clock shift. Everybody's happy with that. The problem is solved. I'm aware of a rumor about a possible drinking problem, so did I use the wrong approach by not making a formal referral to the EAO?**

Your job as a supervisor is to support your organization's mission and properly manage employees under your supervision to support that goal. You had different options for solving this problem, and chose one that worked. Yes, you could have referred your employee to the EAO for being late to work and kept her on the same shift; which may have led to her treatment and recovery and an end to tardiness. Unsubstantiated concerns about a drinking problem should not be a basis for your referral, however. You can only focus on performance. If lateness was due to a drinking problem, this problem may eventually return after a period of exerted self-control. This is not unusual for employees with alcohol problems as they move between jobs or work shifts seeking other life changes in an attempt to gain control over drinking.

■ **Why do supervisors avoid confronting employees about their performance issues?**

The most common reason for avoiding confrontation is fear. Overcoming this fear is accomplished by understanding how to use an effective approach. Being firm and direct – not sugarcoating the message is important, but this can be accomplished in a way that eliminates heavy-handedness and engenders cooperation. For example, *"Bill, I received feedback about your presentation yesterday, and I want to share it with you."* *"Bill, some customers felt your presentation lacked depth in its details, leaving them feeling more confused. Were you aware of these concerns?"* *"Bill, I want to work with you to improve your presentation; how would you suggest we go about making such improvements?"* Notice in these examples how the

supervisor elicits a partnering approach to solving problems. The concerns of the supervisor are concrete and this approach is likely to elicit better cooperation in solving the performance issues, as opposed to harming the relationship by making an employee feel scolded.

■ **When performance issues stem from personal problems at home, it may be appropriate to demonstrate patience while the employee seeks help. Unfortunately, many employees seem to have chronic problems. How can supervisors influence employees to resolve their personal problems permanently?**

Follow-up is the key to helping employees remain successful after referral to the EAO. Don't underestimate how long this should continue. Follow-up means regularly meeting with an employee to discuss performance, reinforcing progress, and troubleshooting obstacles. It also means getting regular feedback from the EAO (*with a signed release*) so that continued participation and cooperation with EAO recommendations can be confirmed. Open communication that involves this harmony of cooperation between employee, EAO, and supervisor is crucial. In its absence, the risk of problems continuing is high. Take the advice of the EAO on the length of time recommended for follow-up, or ask about it. Some personal problems are easier to treat and manage than others. Problems requiring more personal sacrifice and lifestyle changes tend to have the highest relapse rates, making follow-up critical to success.

■ **What can I promise employees with regard to confidentiality and the EAO when they ask about it? I know that confidentiality has limitations with regard to protecting children or the elderly or preventing loss of life, but I don't want to get bogged down in those issues.**

When employees ask about confidentiality, they are usually seeking assurance that they are protected against repercussions, improper disclosure, or harm to their job as a result of utilizing the EAO. The EAO requires informed consent regarding the scope of confidentiality, so let your employees know the EAO can answer any questions at the time of an appointment or beforehand by telephone. Reinforce the strict confidential nature of the EAO whenever you refer to it in the course of your activities and role as a supervisor. Doing so will help to alleviate concerns, making it more likely at-risk employees will seek help, thereby reducing risk to the organization.