

# Frontline Supervisor



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■ **I am a new supervisor, and employees have started coming to me with their need to talk about emotional work issues. They require a good listener. The issues include concerns about downsizing, coworker conflicts, performance, and more. How can I be a good listener?**

The “**active listening model**” will help you demonstrate empathy with your employees in job-related discussions. Start by inviting an employee to sit down in your office. Make the person comfortable, and demonstrate that you are glad he or she came by to talk. Let the employee talk about the issues or concerns. The more you talk, the less your employee will talk, so be careful about jumping in too quickly. Paraphrase what was said so your employee feels heard. Ask questions using “who,” “what,” “where,” and “how.” These four words elicit additional information, and your employee is less likely to forget something important in his or her story. Remember, this is not psychological counseling. These are practical listening skills for improving any relationship.

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■ **My best press operator can be a little rough. He’s bossy, teases the apprentice about his intelligence, calls him “little buddy,” and yells at him. The puzzling piece is that they get along with each other 90 percent of the time, go bowling together, etc. Should I step in and intervene?**

**You should meet** with your pressman to ensure that any behaviors you consider offensive stop. Document your meeting, including his response. You are able to personally judge the behaviors as inappropriate, and despite your apprentice’s apparent lack of assertiveness or willingness to come to you for help, you have a duty to maintain a work environment that is safe, respectful, and supportive. These are bullying behaviors because they are one-sided and show a pervasive ongoing pattern of abuse. The apprentice may be tolerating this bullying behavior out of fear, or coping with it in ways that are beyond your awareness. For example, he may suffer ill effects like sleeping problems or depression. The victimized employee’s socializing with this person does not diminish the importance of the steps you should take. Consider a formal referral to the EAO if the behavior does not stop after your meeting.

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■ **What should I measure to know if my work unit is characterized as having**

**Good communication** in a work unit is characterized by communication that demonstrates strong employee engagement, teams with high morale, and the ability to witness a competitive spirit among a productive group

**“good communication?” I would like to gauge the quality of communication and then respond accordingly, if needed.**

of people. One or more of these things is usually missing when communication suffers. Commonly cited employee complaints linked to problematic communication are inadequate information flow between management and staff and lack of recognition and praise for employees. When you have a troubled employee or an employee who is not performing to expected standards, analyze these factors before attempting to correct performance. Behavioral manifestations of personal problems are often influenced or exacerbated by issues in the work environment, also referred to as climate.

**■ Everyone in our office is smart, but we are all easily distracted. We have a reputation for innovation and corporate entrepreneurship. Is there any need for us to get collective EAO help or should we just leave well enough alone?**

**Research has** shown that distractions can consume as much as a third of the typical workday. These include interruptions like the Internet, email, chitchat in the hallway, snacking, meetings, etc. As an experiment, take one distraction like browsing the Internet and intervene with it. Brainstorm an incentive program and accountability. An incentive program will allow employees to motivate themselves. Have a weekly vote to see who appeared least distracted. Back it up with an accountability strategy. Critical for making this experiment work is spending a few minutes regularly meeting and reinforcing the intervention strategy so it does not plateau, diminish, and stop. Talk to the EAO to explore these strategies.

**■ We have some petty behavior in our workplace. I’m not talking about bullying, but instead nasty notes, silent treatments, withholding information, or not inviting someone to lunch. What can supervisors do?**

**Lost productivity**, diminished employee loyalty, and turnover costs can stem from disrespect in the workplace. Respect in the workplace is aided by visible, proactive leadership and regular communication. If you have been visibly absent or you seldom meet to discuss team issues, start doing so. You may see some of these behaviors stop. Employees take their cues from you on how to speak, behave, and engage with others. They notice your attitude, demeanor, personality, disposition, and how you treat others. All of these things play a role in influencing their behavior. You possess a natural form of influence that comes from being in charge, making decisions, and enforcing standards. This is wonderful leverage for creating a positive work environment. Disrespect is motivated by the desire to exert power over another, demonstrate frustration, or attain something desired. Tell employees you want a more respectful workplace, and expect it to happen. You may be surprised at how fast things can turn around.

## NOTES