

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



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

■ I am a new supervisor and want to get off to a good start. I have 40 employees, many of whom have been around for years. There is tension in the air and a feeling that I have to prove something in order to get their respect.

You are new to the work unit, and a common mistake may be communicating in a way that conveys that you know everything, either accidentally or nonverbally. Sending this message will set you up for a rough ride in the months ahead. To reduce this likelihood, don't admit that you are not knowledgeable about the work and operations of your unit—simply be a good listener and ask questions. Treat employees like they are valuable resources for you, be respectful, and be thankful for their ability get you oriented. You've probably heard that old quip or seen it on T-shirts, "Those who think they know everything are annoying to those of us who do." Your goal is to help ensure that this doesn't become your reality.

■ Q. When employees with performance issues mention their personal problems, I feel obligated to participate in these discussions. It may sound cold, but I want to rid myself of this feeling and focus only on work issues.

Thinking that you are a cold person for not wanting to discuss personal problems with your employees is a clue to the importance of overcoming this challenge. Staying focused on what is relevant to work and avoiding personal issues can be difficult if you are in a supervisory role. Is your awareness about getting too involved a recent development? The EAO is a good starting point to help you identify and work towards overcoming this difficulty. Your feeling is not uncommon. Sometimes relationships in the past, especially in the home, may have been associated with guilt for not being a "fixer," or if you had responsibility for solving others' personal problems or preventing them, you could feel obligated now to get involved with employees' problems. EAO can help you to work through this.

■ When does a workaholic's behavior become a concern for a supervisor? Personally, I admire the productivity and dedication of this person, but I can also see that this may cause resentment.

Your employee may or may not be a workaholic, as with other personal problems, you should avoid making diagnostic conclusions. Many people, even spouses, confuse love of work or working too much with workaholism. Workaholism is characterized by a deeply ingrained and maladaptive need to work; making it a priority and believing no one else can do the job. This creates feelings of insecurity.

ty, failure, and anxiety if one can't work. Ambitious employees who have fewer restrictions and responsibilities at home may naturally work more. Younger employees who enjoy relationships with peers may also put in more hours. Documenting the performance of a workaholic is difficult. A better approach may be to document problematic behaviors, such as accusing others of not working hard enough, claiming to be indispensable, disrespecting others who don't put in as many hours, and refusing to reduce work hours at the organization's request.

■ **We just hired a new employee. It was not easy—we had 98 applications for this position. I want to start this relationship off right. What is the first conversation I should have with the new employee?**

There is at least one discussion you should have with your employee that most managers do not have: why we chose you. It sounds obvious, but this discussion can go a long way toward establishing a future relationship of clear expectations that match a vision you have for your employee's contribution to the organization. It makes that vision more likely to come to fruition. Most employers assume the employee who is hired knows the answer to this question, but this is not usually the case. Your discussion should be more than, "You were the best," "You stood out," or "We liked your experience and your energy." Go deeper. Tell the employee your hopes and dreams for the position. Paint the vision and describe the mountain-top you hope to have your employee ascend with you. This vision becomes an anchor your employee will not forget.

■ **I admit that I am an irritable manager. I can be friendly, and I do have people who love me, but work stress puts me in an irritable, short-tempered, impatient mood, and makes me intolerant of interruptions, etc. I would visit the EAO, but honestly, I am not sure this would help.**

An irritable disposition can be caused by many health and psychological factors. Sorting those things out is your task. You are self-aware and may have unsuccessfully attempted to change the behavior along the way. If that's the case, seeing your medical doctor can help you receive a proper evaluation. Other health, wellness, or mental health professionals can offer advice as well. Here is a checklist of issues to consider: 1) sleep disturbances; 2) healthy eating, diet, and food allergy issues; 3) exercise and relaxation habits; 4) thinking habits and how you reflexively respond to everyday stress. Getting help in this last department may require professional counseling with practical tips for making the changes you want, but you should also consider books like "Attitude Is Everything" by Jeff Keller or similar titles that are typically filled with solid common sense. You can make a lot of headway for a very few dollars.