

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



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

■ I recently participated in EAO supervisor training. Can you explain why the problem affecting the employee and identified by the EAO is not disclosed to the supervisor?

Knowledge of the employee's personal problem is not needed to manage performance, quality of work, attendance, or conduct on the job. This principle is why EAO's easily fit with personnel management models of organizations. There are reasons in place to protect an employee from disclosing personal problems. They relate to confidentiality and perceived confidentiality of the EAO. The EAO's acceptance by the workforce depends on positive word-of-mouth promotion almost entirely related to confidentiality. This is referred to as a "program of attraction." It is a fragile dynamic easily damaged by any perception that personal problems are disclosed to management. Strong policies that support confidentiality help organizations to avoid pitfalls.

■ When organizational crisis exists, what can supervisors do to take charge and influence a large group of employees to remain calm and in control? I've had this experience a couple of times, and frankly I've felt caught off guard and not sure where to start or how to take charge.

When an organizational crisis (large cutbacks, merger, or great loss) suddenly occurs, supervisors must demonstrate leadership. Confusion can reign, rumors can fly, and your work unit could appear on the edge of dysfunction. The need to demonstrate leadership can be daunting. Insecurity can lead a manager to defer to someone else—for example, an assistant supervisor, "right-hand man," or an employee with perceived leadership ability. Avoid this temptation. Instead, grab the reins. Gather employees in a room and use a circle-type seating arrangement. Keep your cool, because during a crisis, employees take cues on how to respond from those in charge. Clarify the problem, update the status, and communicate a goal, objective, or response to the crisis. Next, discuss with each person, using direct eye contact, what he or she is going to do or what role he or she will play in the solution or in achieving the goal. Open a discussion about how the EAO might help, and gather support for its role.

■ I know supervisors are supposed to inspire employees, but shouldn't this mean more than giving a rousing speech or walking around catching employees doing something, right?

Yes! Inspiring employees is a supervisory function, but contrary to popular belief it is not just about giving a speech, praising an employee, or acting optimistic. Inspiring people is about creating an urge for them to do something, especially something creative. The best way to do this is by modeling behavior that inspires. Consider,

which would inspire you more: Listening to a motivational speaker give a speech or watching them perform what they preach all day? It would be the latter, of course. Try modeling the following behaviors along with the attitudes that accompany them: passion for work, commitment, effort, integrity, teamwork, good communication, and vision. Show these positive behaviors consistently and you *will* be an inspiring leader.

■ **I have a few employees who are 15 to 20 years older than their new manager. I imagine some are trying to adjust to the reality of a boss who is young enough to be their child. I'm the department head. Should I coach them now or expect them to "deal with it"?**

Wait until an issue exhibits itself before you step in. Being supervised by a younger employee can raise difficult feelings, but behavior is everything in the workplace, so monitor it. Many older workers, "bothered" by an age difference at first, readily cope in healthy ways and see the upside. Can your employees cooperate and demonstrate mutual respect? If so, view the age difference as a nonissue. For many older workers, a younger supervisor can be an exciting opportunity to learn about different or perhaps better ways of doing things. Some older workers may see a young supervisor as a representation of what they did not accomplish, but most will adapt successfully and this awareness may never turn to conflict. If conflict occurs, address it. If it does not subside, then involve the EAO. Problems you may see could include parenting-like behaviors on the part of the older worker, insubordination, disrespectful tone, arguing, or other forms of disrespect, even bullying.

■ **What is the best way for me to increase my level of cultural sensitivity in the workplace, and what is the best argument for doing so?**

The best argument for increasing one's level of cultural sensitivity is to improve engagement. The Gallup polling organization has maintained a rolling seven-day average of this index ever since first reporting on it many years ago. It stood at only 31% recently for workers in general, but if you add discrimination and lack of cultural sensitivity to the mix of reasons normally cited, this problem is compounded. Improving cultural sensitivity is a professional responsibility. To enhance your cultural competence (also referred to as cultural intelligence or "CQ,") consider books such as David Livermore's, *The Cultural Intelligence Difference*. Another helpful resource is the ExecutivePlanet.com (www.executiveplanet.com). This website describes virtually every aspect of business communication, family values, and the social customs of every country in the world. Want to know what not to talk about when you meet someone from Paraguay? You'll find it here.