

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



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

■ I read that January 25, 2016, will be the most depressing day of the year. Why is this true? Does it have any implications for supervisors in managing employees?

The specific date changes year to year, but the third or fourth Monday in January has been coined Blue Monday. The day was created by a researcher who pointed out that this day represents the gloomiest day because (in the northern hemisphere) it has minimal sunlight, plenty of cold and gloomy weather, and holiday bills coming due—all of those compounded by New Year's resolutions that have been broken since January 1st. There is nothing scientific about this day being the most depressing day of the year, but nevertheless it has a useful purpose, in helping people to become more aware of depression, its symptoms, and its treatability. By promoting this day it is hoped to inspire those needing help to get it. The day is a good one for reminding supervisors that the EAO is available and to consider referrals as needed.

■ Most people think of enabling as protecting an employee by making excuses for mistakes, loaning money, or other classic examples. Are there other more subtle enabling behaviors that supervisors may exhibit? Also, what drives these enabling behaviors?

Most supervisors' enabling behaviors serve to decrease the stress of the supervisor's job by minimizing the perceived severity of the behavioral issues the employee exhibits. To show how veiled yet potent these enabling behaviors can be, consider the following: (1) downplaying inappropriate behavior; (2) ignoring red flags that signal there may be trouble; (3) being agreeable, accepting excuses, and not making waves; (4) minimizing a troubled employee's problems when speaking with one's superiors; (5) giving reassurances to employees when they come to discuss personal problems rather than referring them to the EAO; and (6) doing extra work to help out because of the employee's inability to perform. Engaging in any of these behaviors becomes a habit that is hard to break free of.

■ How can I do a better job of holding my employees accountable?

Most supervisors know that accountability includes having employees answer for their results. But it means a lot more. Accountability is not just an after-the-fact assignment of credit or blame. It is a workplace expectation in the forefront of everyone's mind. It is ideal when it is part of the work culture. A culture of accountability is not difficult to establish, but you have to encourage it. It starts with defining accountability at the most basic level so that

no employee is confused about his or her role in the organization and what it takes to do outstanding work. With this clarity, employees are compelled to reach for outstanding results and want the same from their co-workers. Think of it as a pull strategy rather than a push strategy for results. Meeting with employees to troubleshoot barriers to achievement propels them to accomplish more. Later, holding employees accountable with proper rewards or consequences completes the loop. Accountability can backfire when it is not part of the culture. Employees will resent the accountability that should be part of the working environment.

■ **I don't want my employee's performance to suffer if the EAO is not able to help him to resolve a personal problem. If I have ideas and advice to share that can help the employee, shouldn't I offer it and advise or counsel to protect the bottom line?**

A supervisor can be very knowledgeable about an employee's personal problem, including how it originated, its historical progression, and perhaps where it will lead. It's tempting to step in and offer your counsel, but instead pass this information to the EAO so your role as a supervisor does not become one of dual purpose—insisting on accountability, while also advocating tolerance and patience. When this happens, the employees choose the role you will play, and it is predictably the latter one. This will, in turn, affect the bottom line. Talk to the EAO professional to provide background in order to maintain your boundaries as a supervisor.

■ **How do I get two employees whose personalities clash severely to get along? The EAO is great, but I think these two are beyond help. These employees have significant differences in their backgrounds, energy levels, values, attitudes, work styles, and more.**

Despite the serious differences between your employees, it is not practical or possible to say all hope is lost. Realize that employees in severe conflict usually evolve to the point of impasse. The conflict may appear to be an instant phenomenon, but typically unacceptable behavior, sabotage, withholding information, territorial disputes, and a complete unwillingness to sit down and iron out problems come with time. What fuels growth of a toxic relationship is a lack of consequences. Indeed, managers often back off, tolerate the conflict, hope for the best, and only intermittently get involved during brief crises. Your first step is to meet with the EAO to discuss the problem privately. Examine your commitment to making improvement of the working relationship nonnegotiable. Plan the referral for the two employees to come to the EAO, and make decisions about how you will respond should a resolution not be forthcoming. Predictably, both employees would like to be in less pain. This reality offers strong assurance that the EAO will be able to help.