

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **We have a troubled employee with many behavioral issues who took a leave of absence from work. Lengthy absences had coworkers hoping and believing that he would not return. He has now returned and employees are upset. How can this issue be managed?**

Your employee will return to work and either maintain satisfactory performance or not. If you have a history of documentation, you should continue with it, noting positive changes or continuation of the performance issues. Meet and discuss your concerns with this employee. Set standards for what you expect. Ask how he feels about coming back, whether he feels supported, and what, if anything, is needed from you to do the job well. This discussion demonstrates your impartiality. If employees approach you with dismay and anger, remind them that you are fair and impartial in your supervision. Do not discuss the employee's issues. Encourage individual workers to come to you with their complaints first so you can address them rather than risk a bullying or "mobbing" of this worker by an angry group of coworkers.

■ **What is "mobbing" in the workplace?**

Mobbing refers to a group of employees bullying an individual. Whether coordinated or not, the pattern includes targeting the individual with behaviors generally considered to be harassment. These include "ganging up" on the victim in an effort to force him or her to quit or be transferred. The victim may be targeted with rumors, intimidation, humiliation, or social isolation. When discussing mobbing, these behaviors are generally not sexual or racial in their context, but their maliciousness constitutes harassment.

■ **Temporary workers in our organization sometimes don't get the respect shown to full-timers. Can you comment on the downside and associated risks of not respecting these employees?**

Temporary employees, student hourly, and post docs deserve the same respect as other employees in an organization, but it is easy for some employees to equate the word "temporary" with "less important," "invisible," and "non-person," if only subconsciously. If this connection is made, the risk exists that temporary workers and their needs will be overlooked. This may include failure to discuss their lunch break, not letting them know where bathrooms are located, or forgetting they have to leave on time like everyone else. Temporary workers may be omitted from important staff meetings that include discussions directly relevant to their work and contributions. These employees may have significant influence as they handle the affairs of a business and develop relationships with regular workers. As a supervisor, you should remind employees of the importance of temporary employees to help prevent discrimination. Treat them like welcomed guests and you'll realize a higher cost-benefit in their role.

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- **Will EAOs see employees who come for no other reason than to complain about the boss? Won't EAOs tell employees that they don't handle those kinds of problems?**

Employees feel safe coming to the EAO and know their concerns will be heard without prejudice. It is therefore not unusual for employees to visit the EAO and complain about the boss. Complaining about someone else is a common means of getting help for oneself, and it makes self-referral easier. EAOs know this, so they will not tell an employee, "We don't handle that problem." It is always assumed that other issues exist beyond the primary complaint. These might include performance problems, personal problems, communication issues, poor coping strategies, or mental health issues. Typically, employees are helped to better understand their conflicts with the boss and resolve them through better communication skills or tasks associated with personal change. If it appears that an employee is a victim of an abusive supervisor, other internal resources for resolution are discussed. Managing this type of case illustrates a priceless risk management role for EAOs, because whatever the problem, the EAO's concern is for both the employee's and the organization's well-being. In nearly all cases, agitated employees voicing complaints about the supervisor are looking only to have a better relationship.

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- **We have a very diverse workplace, and I sometimes correct employees when I see them demonstrating poor tolerance of coworkers' differences. I am not an expert on tolerance and bias, so can you offer some language, tips or "phrases" helpful in educating employees?**

Education does help alter bias, but the bottom line is that employee behavior must conform to what is civil and supportive of your organization's work goals. Let employees know that the goal of tolerance is a respectful workplace and that without it, the interests of the work organization are not served. When correcting employee behavior in the context of supervisory meetings, your goal should be to educate, not counsel or investigate the psychological influences of employee bias. Given that, the following can help your discussions be more effective. Key tolerance principles: 1) Look past differences of opinion, orientation, ethnic or racial backgrounds; focus on understanding a colleague's views and perspective. 2) Avoid the trap of tuning out simply because someone talks or looks different. 3) Avoid labels. Monitor your speech patterns — and thinking style — to check whether you label others. 4) If you disagree with someone's views, react with curiosity rather than defensiveness. Ask at least one earnest, nonthreatening question to dig for more information. Be willing to change your mind and expand your frame of reference. 5) Speak up when hurtful comments are overheard. 6) Reject intolerance when you see it demonstrated.