

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **One of my employees chronically comes in late. I plan to make a supervisor referral. Should I also probe the reasons why? I don't think it really matters, and I probably won't get the whole truth, so why risk getting bogged down in excuses?**

Yes, ask your employee why he or she is coming to work late. The reason for asking is to rule out any issue that could be work-related over which you have control or influence to change. Remember, coming to work on time is a requirement for most jobs, and is a measurable performance issue. You have a right to at least ask why he or she is not able to arrive on time. If your employee discloses a work-centered reason for tardiness; address it. If your employee mentions a personal problem, accept the answer, but recommend the EAO as a resource for proper help. Talk to the EAO beforehand to provide background information.

■ **Supervisors prefer to avoid conflicts with employees, which is why many of us do not hold employees accountable. I know lack of accountability is a significant complaint of top management, but avoidance of conflict seems to help manage stress.**

Seeking to reduce conflict is a worthy pursuit, but this is different from being “conflict avoidant.” Conflict avoidance is a dysfunctional approach to conflict management that seeks to evade or steer clear of disagreements, quarrels, and the work needed to resolve them. Problems, therefore, grow worse, rather than being transformed into opportunities that can lead to more efficient work systems with higher productivity. Conflict avoidance requires a decision by the supervisor to abdicate his or her responsibility for resolving conflicts. Supervisors who typically avoid conflict are unaware that systematic steps and procedures for resolving conflict exists, and that conflict can ultimately become a success story, not a bad memory. The EAO is experienced in conflict resolution and can play a consultative role to supervisors. Reach out and encourage your supervisor peers to do the same.

■ **I am a new supervisor. I can see right away that I am the “one in the middle” with my supervisor above me and the employees below me each needing different things. What is the number one mistake I am likely to make as a new supervisor**

The number one mistake that you are likely to make as a new supervisor is failing to see your role as a “teacher” instead of a “cop.” This slipup results from stereotypes you might hold of what supervisors do, insecurity about your supervisory skills, and fear of not being taken seriously. To reduce the likelihood of making this mistake, develop individual workplace relationships with everyone you supervise. Begin to understand five things about each employee—what their key skills are, what they want to learn more about, what motivates them, how much feedback they want or need, and their preferred form of

communication. This will prevent a barrier forming between you and your employee caused by slow, simmering resentment toward you for not meeting his/her needs. If you are unsure about how to approach employees or communicate with them, sit down with the EAO and devise a plan or approach.

■ **I have an employee whom I consider lazy, but referral to the EAO for this problem doesn't sound like the right step to take. Do you have recommendations for dealing with "laziness"?**

Some employees may appear to lack motivation to accomplish required tasks of their job. You are correct that a referral to the EAO is not the right step initially, but it may come later after you attempt the following work-centered interventions. Note that this is not a diagnostic process. Hold a discussion with your employee about how he/she feels about the job. Seek to uncover his or her attitudes toward it. Ask about his or her personal goals in relation to the work. Be honest, and say that you have noticed a slow-moving work style, trouble taking initiative, not always getting things done on time, or other measurable behaviors. Don't label the employee as lazy. Stress the value of the employee's position in the organization, and see whether you can elicit a higher level of involvement. If this step fails, then arrange an EAO referral.

■ **My employee has been visiting the EAO once per week for about a month. I am not seeing changes in his attitude or attendance. Can I phone the EAO to let them know, or ask them what is the best next step?**

The answer depends on what you are willing to tolerate or postpone. Speaking with the EAO and giving feedback is a smart move because the EA professional can interview the employee and, relying on your feedback, make adjustments to EAO recommendations, the treatment plan, or instructions given to the employee. Supervisors often observe behavior changes that the EAO may not. They should communicate their observations to the EAO without delay. These problems often signal that the employee has stopped participating in its recommendations. EAOs can't tell managers how to respond administratively in situations like this, but with a more complete picture made possible by communication, they will usually know what's best.