

Employees—  
Your Most  
Valuable  
Resource

# Frontline Supervisor



EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE OFFICE (EAO) – 608/263-2987 – [www.wisc.edu/eao](http://www.wisc.edu/eao)

■ **Some employees do very well after referral to addiction treatment programs, but some do not. They relapse, struggle, and eventually lose their jobs. Are there “hopeless” cases? How can supervisors intervene earlier or increase the likelihood of success for these employees?**

■ **There is much pessimism in the news regarding how employees feel about their jobs and their employers. Even I feel it. I am only one supervisor, but what can I do to promote a positive attitude at work?**

■ **I have recently switched departments and am now overseeing many blue-**

**Within the recovering** community of alcoholics and among treatment professionals, there are many stories of alcoholics who seemed unable to achieve abstinence. In the “Big Book” of Alcoholics Anonymous, authors discuss the success of the 12 steps yet observe how some alcoholics seem almost “constitutionally” incapable of recovery. Most treatment professionals would never use the word “hopeless,” because so many examples of late-stage recoveries exist. Supervisors should not assume any employee is hopeless, but this does not mean ignoring problems. Supervisors, like family members, should learn about enabling and avoid doing it. Enabling plays a key role in the progression of addictive disease and, in turn, resistance to treatment. Like alcoholism, enabling can manifest a chronic and progressive pattern. In the early years of the disease, a supervisor may overlook performance shortcomings. Twenty years later, the same supervisor may be driving his or her employee to work because of a confiscated driver’s license. Loaning money and covering for behavioral problems are also not uncommon. Feel free to contact the EAO with any questions/concerns you may have.

**Although increasing work** and economic stress, along with loss of loyalty to the employer, is often reported, the news is not all bad. Research shows that a majority of employees do feel engaged in their work, although more so in smaller organizations. This sentiment may result from feeling that they have more control over their work. So, the more you can help employees feel a sense of control or ownership over their work, the better off they will be. Many organizations wonder what managers or supervisors can do to improve their workers’ attitudes. Less frequently asked is what percent of supervisors and managers cared about the fate of their employer. Unless a supervisor cares about an employer, it will be difficult to influence morale in subordinates. Examine yourself and determine whether you periodically demonstrate a negative attitude that may contribute to the problem you are trying to solve. If you find yourself guilty of this, contact the EAO to explore what may be getting in your way of a more positive attitude.

**Often blue-collar jobs** tend to be dirty, dangerous, and/or demanding (heavy physical) work. Some white-collar jobs may share these characteristics but these factors overwhelmingly tilt toward blue-collar

**collar workers. This is new for me. Is there anything I need to know about working with blue-collar workers as opposed to white-collar workers?**

occupations. Your first task is to evaluate and overcome any stereotypes, myths or unhelpful biases toward blue-collar workers that are based upon your life experience. The type of job a person has is often falsely associated with judgments about intelligence, abilities, sophistication, motivation, ambition, education, desire to climb the occupational ladder, social habits, cultural differences, and other factors. These myths can be reinforced by popular culture. They can undermine the ability to build positive relationships with employees that are needed to maximize their productivity. Talk to the EAO and learn more about your supervision style and the work culture if you remain concerned. EAOs often have keen insights on work culture and organizational history that can be helpful to supervisors. Don't ignore difficulty in bonding with your employees. Problems in this area need fast and early attention.

---

**■ I am a new supervisor and there are a million things to learn. Can you discuss one critical thing I should keep in mind that most supervisors overlook or don't consider as they take on their new role?**

**As a new supervisor**, a powerful yet often overlooked bit of advice or awareness is to remember that employees are, first and foremost, "supervisor watchers." They pay attention to everything you say and do. They'll track your every move through the work unit, come to understand your moods, remember what you said at the water cooler two years earlier, and more. They will model or behave in ways that are consistent with the way you behave. If you speak badly of the organization, they will too. If you take pride in the work unit and praise the work organization, ditto. This principle applies to interpersonal matters, such as treating others with respect, as well. Never stop learning and you will watch them do the same. Set a good example for your employees to emulate. The most powerful tools supervisors possess are their reputations and conscientious use of themselves to influence those they lead.

---

**■ I am nervous about a disciplinary meeting with my employee. I fear appearing anxious and inexperienced. Can the EAO help?**

**Being nervous** in anticipation of a disciplinary meeting is normal. There is a way to reduce the degree of nervousness, and the EAO can help. Try rehearsing difficult conversations using role-play with the EA professional. (Inquire as to whether HR can assist you, as well, and be sure to follow any steps or procedures they prefer.) Anticipate the kind of questions the employee will ask and practice your answers. A few tips: Keep your responses to the point. Do not wander off topic or place a priority on helping the employee walk away feeling OK and accepting about the disciplinary action. Some nervous supervisors who worry about "bad feelings" are drawn into talking too much or repeating themselves, not giving the employee ample time to respond. Knowing how you are going to structure your meeting will also reduce your nervousness.

---

## NOTES