

Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **There is a common saying in management that employees don't leave companies, they leave supervisors. Obviously this means the quality of the supervisor-supervisee relationship is crucial. Does the EAO have a role in helping managers keep good relationships with the employees?**

The phrase is oversimplified, but an employee's relationship with the supervisor is the most important one. Unless this relationship is constructive and positive, the risk of losing a worker to another employer or, worse, to a competitor will remain unacceptably high. Kevin Sheridan, a business consultant specializing in talent management, reports in his new book, *Building a Magnetic Culture* (2012), that engaged employees are ten times more likely to feel their work is recognized, that their supervisors and top management care about them, and that they are getting useful regular feedback. Such employees are four times less likely to leave. Obviously the supervisor is a key influence in helping employees get these needs met. EAOs have a role to play in helping supervisors enhance their relationships with employees. The purview of EAO work is often the business of improving relationships; therefore, use of the EAO is an excellent strategy for increasing employee engagement and thus the improvement of business outcomes.

■ **I believe everyone should contribute to and maintain a positive work culture. How can I help my employees play this positive role?**

The first steps to building a positive work culture begin with the employer and flow down from the top where all levels of management practice behaviors that all staff below them model. There are many components of a thriving positive work culture, but supervisory staff do have influence in helping their employees buy into positivity. It's been shown that positive work cultures tend to be easier to come by when the up and down movement of information and ideas is not encumbered by bureaucracy. This highlights a key strategy you can employ to influence your employees: promote easier communication, faster communication, and the personal modeling of behaviors that support a positive work culture.

■ **An employee died from a drug overdose. Everyone was saddened and surprised. The employee was one of our most loved. I heard something**

Your employee could have relapsed without any warning signs you could have spotted. Drug addiction can be treated and abstinence achieved, and with a programmatic approach to maintaining abstinence, the illness is arrested. Abstinent employees refer to themselves as "recovering" or in recovery. Years of abstinence can pass, and achievements and performance may be outstanding, but the disease does not vanish. Addiction is a chronic illness. Experts in the addiction treatment field

about a drug problem years ago, but never since, and performance was excellent. I am feeling guilty. Did I miss symptoms?

generally regard drug addiction as a progressive disease with no cure. Every area of an addict's life is affected and must be treated: physical, emotional, and spiritual. A recovering addict without an active and effective approach to recovery has a higher risk of relapse over those who have such an approach. Consequences of any relapse are unpredictable, but death from a narcotic overdose for relapsed addicts is possible. When addicts in recovery overdose and die, there may be great difficulty in comprehending why. It may be helpful for you to contact the EAO regarding your feelings of guilt.

■ What am I supposed to do with an employee who is obviously smart but always showing off how much he “thinks” he knows about what’s legal for me to do as a supervisor, what the organization can’t do, etc. It is a bit intimidating.

The employee you describe may have difficulty feeling responsible or subordinate to you, so controlling you by discussing or referencing legal matters to intimidate you is an effective way of feeling more in control. A wide range of issues can contribute to this negative and problematic behavior, including anger, mental health issues, and more. The behavior is inappropriate and disruptive to communication and building a working relationship, so it should be addressed. Consult with the EAO for guidance on your approach. Often, employee assistance professionals can spot tangential issues or consider underlying contributing factors to a problem like this one. Let your supervisor or leadership staff be aware of the difficulty you are experiencing with this employee. Doing so is prudent because issues of this nature are too important to ignore or manage in isolation.

■ I am a supervisor. Can you advise me on what behaviors to avoid that upset employees most, but which they are not likely to complain about until they have grown angry and resentful?

Help your employees by avoiding the following classic behaviors:

- 1) Asking employees to involve themselves with a project or task and then suddenly asking them to stop it and jump to another.
 - 2) Proclaiming the tasks that you ask employees to take on as emergencies that need to be addressed immediately.
 - 3) Correcting employees in front of their peers.
 - 4) Promising anything you’re not certain of to employees in order to boost their morale, then later apologizing that you “couldn’t get it approved.”
 - 5) Accepting credit from top management for projects completed by your staff, and then explaining to your staff that you had accepted thanks on their behalf.
 - 6) Making inappropriate jokes, remarks or innuendos.
- Most of these behaviors have one prevention technique: being aware of how you use the power naturally afforded by your position.

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