

Employees—  
Your Most  
Valuable  
Resource

# Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **I have a few employees with negative attitudes, but if I can manage to keep other employees away from them, I am willing to tolerate their behavior because they aren't going to change. Is my approach acceptable, or am I avoiding the inevitable?**

**It would be convenient** if difficult and unhelpful employees could be isolated, and then counted on not to affect the rest of the work unit. Unfortunately, even if you could isolate these employees, experience shows that attitude problems have tangible impacts on productivity that you may not see at first. Ripple effects follow. You should therefore take a proactive approach. Employees with attitude problems will display diminished commitment to their jobs and reduced loyalty to the organization and they will not measure up to their potential. Don't fall into the common trap of assuming everyone will get used to, or learn to accept, the attitude problem. Depend on HR to show you how to document and confront employees who struggle with attitude problems and the EAO to coach you on how to address behaviors.

■ **One of my employees has complained that a co-worker of his is a bully. He cites numerous examples, but I am not so sure the complaints add up to much. Should I refer the bully to the EAO? Should I ignore these types of interpersonal issues?**

**You should listen** to your employee's complaints, keep a record of these discussions, investigate and correct inappropriate behavior brought to your attention by others. If your investigation determines bullying, contact the EAO to make a supervisory referral for the person who is doing the bullying. The person who is being bullied might also benefit from meeting with the EAO. Just as you would handle complaints of sexual harassment, establish a record of being proactive against bullying behavior rather than ignoring or dismissing it. Bullying continues to be a workplace issue, although media attention to the problem fluctuates. One growing threat is a call by legal advocacy groups to hold employers financially responsible for bullying behavior. Some of these groups are conducting research to determine the frequency of bullying behavior. These groups argue that bullying behavior frequently falls outside normal legal protections like those for discrimination, harassment and other employment rights violations.

■ **I am sure many employees experience financial problems, but I don't hear much talk about it. Besides stress and worry, how can employees suffer from financial problems?**

**A recent *MetLife Study of Employee Benefits Trends*** discovered that about 44% of employees live paycheck to paycheck, and nearly 60% are very concerned about having enough money to make ends meet. Most people would agree that financial stress is difficult with its accompanying worry and distraction, but this is only part of the story. Many people endure financial stress alone because of stigma, fear of being judged by others, or feeling guilty because of overspending. These issues can keep employees from seeking help even from their EAO. Financial stress can contribute

to headaches, back aches, ulcers, increased blood pressure, depression, anxiety, and panic. Many employees will cope with financial stress using denial, “magical” thinking, and/or coping strategies that relieve fear but don’t solve their problems. As problems worsen, risk increases for falling prey to payday loans, Internet schemes, gambling, or other high-risk “remedies.” Financial problems diminish one’s sense of autonomy, feelings of security, and self-control. So with financial problems come increased workplace absenteeism, diminished workplace performance, and depression. All these things can adversely affect productivity. The EAO is a good source for recommending community resources that are available.

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■ **I am in favor of employees using the EAO to help them manage stress, and I am happy to encourage them to do so, especially during these stressful times. What can I say to increase their motivation to consider the EAO?**

**When encouraging use** of the Employee Assistance Office, go beyond merely stating that the EAO is a helpful resource. You can increase motivation to use this service by reinforcing important aspects of the EAO’s unique approach, particularly its confidential nature. Let your employee know that using the EAO or refusing to, will not be held against them. It can be helpful to mention specific types of problems many employees experience and that are appropriate for taking to the EAO. These include work-related concerns, family problems, struggles with teenagers, or communication conflicts in couples’ relationships. Repetition of a positive EAO message is one key to improve utilization, but nothing is more powerful than a supervisor who encourages use of the EAO.

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■ **I think awareness of the symptoms of burnout is important for employees so they can consider getting help early. Are there measurable and documentable symptoms of burnout that supervisors should know so they can document this condition and refer employees to the EAO?**

**There are job** performance issues associated with burnout, but using them to determine if your employee is dealing with burnout is not a good idea. These behavioral signs and symptoms are usually secondary to the underlying mental health issues. Also, other problems may contribute to what appear to be burnout symptoms. Avoid trying to make a diagnosis. For example, one symptom of burnout may be dread at getting up in the morning to go to work. You can’t document “dread,” but you can document tardiness. Another symptom of burnout may be resentment toward other employees who love their jobs and are bright-eyed about their careers. You can’t document resentment, but you can document conflict. It is hard to document “lack of motivation,” but it is easy to document incomplete assignments, lack of initiative, or work delays.

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## NOTES