

Employees—  
Your Most  
Valuable  
Resource

# Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **I witnessed two employees in our division making a sexually provocative comment to the administrative assistant who works there. I gave them the evil eye and I'm sure they got the message loud and clear. It was a first-time incident. Should I have done more?**

**Yes, you should have** said more just as you would to an employee smoking beside a fuel pump. A facial gesture will not prove that you corrected the behavior and it won't demonstrate adequately your disapproval of it. You can decide on the corrective response, but the goal is to protect the victim so that the incident is not repeated, and document it. You will then be on solid ground if you are ever officially asked about it. This may not be the first incident. Let the victimized employee know that you heard the comment and addressed it, and encourage this employee to come to you with any concerns relative to co-workers' inappropriate behavior. State that you will not tolerate disrespect in the workplace or harassment of any type. Make note of this meeting. This is not overreacting. Employers are now in the hot seat when it comes to issues of sexual harassment and must act to protect employees and the employer.

■ **My employee said he is drinking after many years of being sober. Work performance is outstanding. Is there anything I should be doing about this situation?**

**There is no issue** within the scope of your supervisory responsibilities that requires your intervention. You are not privy to information related to this employee's medical history or the circumstances, so you can't evaluate or guess what might be of concern in this situation. Even if you did have complete understanding of the medical background, the issue of having no performance issues dictates your response to the situation. Relapses typically lead to job performance, attendance, and/or conduct issues, but there is no way to predict if or when these might occur. Because your employee shared with you a brief history and his current situation with regard to alcohol use, you may wish to remind him that the EAO exists as a source of help should he decide he needs it in the future.

■ **What is the key issue in a leadership role that can undermine their attempt to achieve workplace goals and build a cohesive team?**

**A key leadership skill** is identifying the skills and talents of employees and motivating them to use those skills in the pursuit of organizational goals. Effective leaders invest in developing constructive working relationships with their employees, and they help them apply their talents in the pursuit of those goals. Behaviors that demonstrate effective leadership skills are both learned and naturally part of some supervisors' personalities, but

the investment by the leader in authentically meeting the needs of the team is what promotes loyalty and motivates followers (employees). The payoff for effective leadership is acquiring influence. Many supervisors reverse this process or miss part of it in their pursuit of becoming a leader. They focus more, or too much on, achieving goals, while neglecting the needs of employees on whom they rely. Leaders will not generate loyalty without also developing meaningful, professional relationships with the employees they supervise.

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■ **I am a new supervisor. I tend to avoid conflict. Perhaps it is my lack of experience that explains my avoidance issues. But I wonder whether my avoidance is explained by something more deeply personal than a simple lack of experience. What should I do?**

**Being a new supervisor** and not having prior experience in leadership positions can be intimidating and difficult. Generally, supervisors and managers improve as they participate in various forms of continuing education and reach out to experienced supervisors willing to coach and advise them. Experience is the best teacher, of course. None of these steps guarantee the acquisition of effective leadership skills. Indeed, many supervisors acquire attitudes about styles of supervision that undermine their leadership abilities. Self-awareness and interest in your personal growth are essential to becoming a good manager. These will lead you to challenge and overcome personal weaknesses, quirks, and other foibles that get in the way of your goal. The EAO can help you discover and overcome these personal challenges. Another excellent resource for new supervisors are the Office of Human Resource Development's Principles of Supervision and Management courses.

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■ **We are all doing more with less. Helping employees cope with this reality is the supervisor's job. I don't see this "more with less" trend changing. What guidance exists for supervisors on how to meet this modern challenge?**

**The answer to this** question varies among employers. It is an important one to consider because employees will gravitate toward burnout, and it will affect the bottom line if there are no creative solutions. Turnover and low morale are two examples. Part of the answer lies in helping employees help each other. This idea of developing a "high nurture" workforce focuses on employees improving communication, sharing skills, getting intra- and inter-organizational training, cooperating with each other more, solving problems together, inspiring and praising one another, recognizing and rewarding one another, processing stress together, and generally building cohesiveness. The ideas above are proven ways of building and maintaining high morale and lowering the risk of burnout.

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## NOTES