

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 been a manager for about two years, but frankly, I don't like the job. I accepted this position because I was too embarrassed to say I didn't want it. I can't quit, but I don't think I'm cut out for the pressure and expectations. How do I cope with this situation?**

**If you can't quit**, you have only a couple of options: Improve your ability to cope with a job you don't like or acquire what it takes to be more accepting of the position and its responsibilities. You may want to consider working with employee assistance concerning these issues. Dislike for your position may be a combination of many factors, such as your need to learn to cope with job pressures, fear of responsibility, depression, inadequate supervisory skills (there are dozens of them, and they are teachable), lack of balance in your life (allowing you to do things outside of work that you enjoy), and lack of stress management techniques designed for the specific issues you face on the job. See if working on these issues improves job satisfaction.

■ **My employee was unable to stick with a treatment program for alcoholism. Unfortunately, the employee's job was lost due to the relapse. Why do some employees recover while others do not? I can't help but think the relapse was somehow partly my fault.**

**As with the treatment** of any chronic condition, the burden of following instructions and managing a program of recovery from alcoholism rests with the alcoholic (patient). A frustrating part of alcoholism is relapse. Your feeling upset and wondering if you could have prevented it is a natural response. However, the relapse is not your fault. A universal tenet in all effective treatment models is that patients are responsible for their own recovery. There can be many reasons for a relapse, including inadequate treatment, inefficient or inadequate follow-up, concurrent mental health or physical problems, provocative and non-supportive living environments, failure to follow instructions, poor education about the illness, and relationships with codependent persons who undermine recovery. A failure to change one's lifestyle is often another cause of relapse. The best way you can help your employees is by better understanding the disease with help from the EAO, referring employees to the EAO when performance issues appear, and holding them accountable for their own conduct or performance.

■ **The recent U.S. Secret Service scandal shed light, in part, on the role of supervisors, improper conduct, inappropriate boundaries, and how**

**Those in leadership** roles who decide to behave as peers with their supervisees risk rendering their authority irrelevant. Management trainees and their employers can benefit from learning more about this dynamic and its powerful effect in undermining productivity and the organization's mission. What supervisors do always takes precedence over what they believe, say, and think—even if a history of positive leadership exists.

**managers can undermine the mission of a work unit by choosing to become “one of the boys”? Why does this happen?**

Behavior always trumps because it is observable. The problem for many supervisors is that they lose track of the organization’s mission as their goal. Instead, their relationship with supervisees becomes more important. The mission then unwittingly becomes subordinate to it. Ironically, these supervisors often believe their priorities are properly aligned or complementary. Supervisors can benefit from the EAO’s ability to help them examine these misplaced loyalties, and top management should refer these troubled supervisors early—as soon as the problematic pattern comes to light.

**■ I have an excellent worker with a serious absenteeism issue. I hesitate to initiate a confrontation or take disciplinary action because these options could damage my relationship with this employee. Pushing a formal EAO referral might also be problematic. What should I do?**

**A supervisor with** an outstanding worker who has an absenteeism problem is a classic example of why employee assistance melds so efficiently with management practices. Most supervisors with the problem you describe hope for the pattern of absenteeism to spontaneously resolve itself, but unfortunately this rarely happens. Talk to the EAO first. Bring and share information you’ve documented about the absenteeism pattern. This will help the EA professional determine how you can better monitor and properly confront your employee. You will need to face the consequences that will appear if this problem continues. Will your job be jeopardized? Will other employees’ health suffer from working overtime? Will direct and indirect costs associated with the absenteeism climb? Currently, your procrastination feels preferable over taking action, but working with the EAO may help you feel comfortable about moving closer to intervening in this situation (rather than losing control of it and experiencing undesirable consequences).

**■ How can I encourage my employees to utilize my expertise as a supervisor or manager? I think some employees are unsure about how to use a supervisor as a resource. I don’t want to be just a boss, but a teacher, mentor, and career adviser as well.**

**Many employees** approach their jobs with the idea that the supervisor plays only a punitive role. Younger employees may be more susceptible to this pattern of thinking. This misconception can make employees quiet and “avoidant.” To intervene, offer guidance on how you can benefit them, especially their careers. Share how you can help employees develop their goals, identify and point out strengths and areas for growth, deliver knowledge and experience, delegate valuable assignments to encourage skill building, offer brainstorming collaboration, problem-solve workload and manageability issues, and invite suggestions for changes in the office or workflow. Explain that you seek loyalty from employees, but this does not mean agreeing with everything you say. Don’t hesitate to put these and other issues into writing if it will help your employees make more constructive use of your role.

## NOTES