

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **I believe I am not the only supervisor who dreads performance reviews, but is there a way I can make better use of them during the year rather than simply churning them out annually and saying goodbye to the employee until the next year?**

Performance reviews and performance management systems are powerful productivity processes that can help drive an organization's achievements. But when not used to their full potential, performance reviews can instead become a burden to both the supervisor and supervisee. At the very least, use employee reviews as springboards for discussions with your employees about their goals and aspirations. Discover the degree of inspiration your employees possess to do their best work, and learn how to increase it. Chances are that you will discover something you did not know about your employees' needs, that if met, would better serve the organization's mission and goals. Also, be sure to let your employees hear from you firsthand the importance of what they are doing and how it fits with the organization's mission. All employees look and hope for pay increases, but hearing that they are personally valued fulfills a level of need that the paycheck won't necessarily reach.

■ **My department head gave me an uneasy look the other day because my employees were in the break room socializing and not working at their desks. Personally, I think there is value in socializing for morale, but how rigid should I be about curbing it?**

Your question is an age-old one for supervisors. You're right about socializing. It does benefit morale, and employees who enjoy each other are more likely to be energetic and stick around. That's good for productivity. Some management experts argue that socializing employees can be more productive and that interaction facilitates creativity, self-assessment, synergism, new ideas, and the employees' ability to learn about and recognize each other's strengths. However, it's true that socializing employees may avoid work or be easily distracted, so there is such a thing as too much socializing. But how much distraction, socializing, and hanging out in the break room is too much? You're the only one who can answer that question. Now that you have a better awareness of the benefits of socializing on the job, you can view and manage it as a resource rather than as an annoyance.

■ **I think supervisors are sometimes too worried about getting involved with the personal problems of employees. As a result, they appear impersonal and employees**

There is a difference between getting involved in an employee's personal problems and being supportive. A supervisor does not have to behave in a detached and aloof manner to keep from getting involved with the employee's issues. The challenge comes when a personal problem appears simple or understandable to the supervisor. It is then tempting to offer advice, despite unknown dimensions to the problem that might exist. The other part of this challenge comes from employees who want the supervisor involved in their problems. These employees want a different

recognize it. This compounds problems because employees think the supervisor does not care about them. Am I right?

type of relationship with their supervisor – one that meets their personal Supervisors should resist, as it is important for them to understand that meeting personal needs and going beyond their normal role will almost always interfere with managing productivity later.

Supervisors are not group therapists, so how can we play a role in resolving workplace negativity? I admit I see plenty of it, but if the work gets done, I am inclined to ignore it. Perhaps I am not aware of the true impact of negativity and strategies to help stop it.

If you are unaware of the costs associated with workplace negativity or what strategies can address it, you are more likely to ignore it, tolerate it, or even worse, join in. Workplace negativity isn't just about employees griping or picking on each other or what's overheard in the restroom. Workplace negativity damages the work culture, and a deliberate approach is often needed to reverse it. Your primary tool for fighting negativity is communication. Intervening may not be easy, but the trick is to not give up. For example, you may be unable to stop layoffs, but you may be able to facilitate support systems, improved communication, and quicker responses to un-founded rumors. Talk to the EAO, and be open-minded if asked about your supervision style; perhaps it contributes unwittingly to workplace negativity. Examining all angles is important. Strategies will vary depending on the issues, but once you decide upon an approach, be sure to establish a process that helps you prevent the return to a negative work culture.

Employees teased another worker about drinking large soda drinks. The employee was clearly not happy about it. I thought about speaking up, but figured it was okay for them to continue because the issue of large soda drinks is so prevalent in the news.

Whether news exists about the harmful effects of smoking, large fountain drinks, red meat, or tanning beds, it is important as a supervisor to remain focused on maintaining respectful behavior in the workplace. The intensity of media attention to topical issues can make it seem "okay" to criticize others or treat them with less respect. Harassment in the workplace has a broad definition, and it takes the passive approval of only one authority figure to encourage some employees who may have kept silent to join in on treating others with disrespect. Most supervisors underestimate their level of influence with their employees. Realize that stepping in to correct this behavior may be welcomed. This is because many employees who behave disrespectfully also have second thoughts about it, even as they are participating. Your visible disapproval and corrective action as an authority figure can be powerful – not only for stopping disrespectful behavior but for reinforcing the importance of maintaining a positive and affirming workplace.

NOTES