

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **I have discovered that since becoming a supervisor, I sometimes find it difficult to meet my employees' and my employer's needs equally. I try to draw a balance, but it is clearly not always possible. How do I straddle the fence of loyalty between these two groups better?**

■ **I don't hear many complaints, but are employees at risk for burnout by being so responsive to customers and work demands? How much pressure can I put on them?**

■ **What can a supervisor or manager do to facilitate the establishment of a positive work culture that promotes collaboration, innovation, and risk taking by employees to maximize their productivity?**

Being a good supervisor should not be an issue of straddling the fence between competing groups. Every great supervisor knows that their first responsibility is to develop a productive relationship with employees so they can get the work done. A productive relationship means fairness, clear and good communication, recognition and reward. The needs of the employer are met as a result of these actions. The workplace must not be a "them versus us" game. Some supervisors do not understand this point. Because their employees are directly in front of them all the time, and their need to please is great, it's easy to hear employee complaints, be sympathetic and feel as though they are the "main thing." Some managers may view themselves as "champions for the people." This is a role fraught with stress. There is nothing wrong with looking out for your employees, but if the needs of the organization are pushed to second place in the process, you will not serve either.

Burnout and lower productivity may be consequences of overwork, but realize that some employees like checking e-mail in the off-hours, first thing in the morning, and even before retiring in the evening. Others may sleep better knowing what awaits them as they walk through the door the next day. Technology allows employees to intervene earlier with problems and reduce their magnitude. Work-life balance is certainly important, but employees must define and redefine what this ultimately means to them. Good communication with your employees and willingness to negotiate with them can help ensure they are happy. This is the bottom line. Do you have this sort of relationship with them? If so, you increase the likelihood of having excited and engaged employees who go the extra mile, love work, and don't burn out.

Terry Jones, the founder of Travelocity.com, gave a keynote address at an annual meeting of corporate executives last month. His presentation focused on how to create a work culture that generates enthusiasm for innovation. Summarized below are key points he imparted to his audience. See which ones you can institute as a manager in your work unit: 1) Don't be afraid to fail. "If you don't fail, you're not having enough at bats." 2) "Kill the project, not the person" if an idea doesn't work. 3) Study your failures like football teams review tapes of

unsuccessful plays. 4) Don't dismiss out of hand ideas of staff. This is where many great ideas originate. 5) Surround yourself with diverse talents that can synergize. Source: University of Texas, Press Release <http://bitly.com/terry-jones-1017>

■ **Can you suggest specific language to use to make a formal supervisor referral when a potential disciplinary action exists if performance doesn't improve? I know to use the EAO in supervision, but I think hearing all the "pieces" to include would be helpful.**

What you say to employees may vary depending on the circumstances of the referral, so consulting with your EAO regarding each referral is a good idea. However, the following is a good general approach: "In light of our discussion regarding your ongoing performance problems, I am formally referring you to the EAO because the problems have not been corrected. Your referral is based only on performance issues. You should know that a disciplinary action may (will) be imposed if improvement is not forthcoming. Here is the name of the EA professional and the EAO phone number. Please accept this referral and make a call to schedule an appointment. (Consider: You are welcome to use my phone. Would you like to do that?) Joe, your contact with the EAO is confidential according to their policy. Participation is not recorded in your personnel file, and I won't be requesting to know or learning of any personal issues you discuss. It is my hope that this resource will be able to help you to correct your performance issues."

■ **How should I approach an employee when making a referral to the EAO? Should I be serious and stern or try to sell the employee on going with a smile and excitement? Perhaps my demeanor should be somewhere in between.**

Remember it is the employee's responsibility to accept a referral to the EAO, regardless of your approach. Your focus on performance and what happens if it improves or what happens if it does not improve is what will make all the difference in employee motivation. Therefore, do not use the EAO as a punitive device. Doing so can prompt your employee to suddenly reject the entire idea of using the EAO, whereas a more supportive approach would facilitate cooperation. See your employees as individuals and the valuable resources they truly are. Approach them with hope and a sense of opportunity and optimism. If you display this affirming attitude in your dealings with them, you will increase the EAO's appeal. Your support is important in the promotion of any professional counseling, assistance, and self-help program.

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