

Frontline Supervisor



Employee Assistance Office (EAO) – 608-263-2987 – www.eao.wisc.edu

■ **Is it appropriate to refer employees to the EAO when they have complaints about each other? When attempting to resolve complaints, I often find that they are complicated by personality factors, and involve issues that extend beyond the workplace.**

■ **I don't see a lot of passion among employees in our workplace for the work they do or the exciting direction our organization is heading in. What could be undermining employee passion?**

■ **More than any factor influencing the success of the EAO, is confidentiality. How do supervisors unwittingly jeopardize this positive perception of confidentiality, and how can they enhance it?**

It is **expected** that supervisors will mediate disputes between co-workers, but this presumes the conflicts are work related. Resolving disputes can mean personally sitting down to help work things out, requiring employees to resolve issues on their own, or using approved resources within the organization to get the job done. Seeking help from the EAO is appropriate, especially if you discover that the conflict has multiple parts beyond work-related matters. EAO consultants are experts at sorting things out and analyzing complex conflicts. Often, resolving conflicts includes interventions with the problem at more than one level. An example would be helping an employee with a medical problem, anxiety, or other troublesome issue contributing to the conflict. Frequently, visible issues such as bickering, fighting over shared space, and disrespectful behavior have less visible contributing factors. Trying to resolve a conflict without considering these other dimensions becomes an exercise in futility.

Passion is a compelling desire to engage in the work and do the best job possible. Many factors help promote passion in employees. Some of these factors can be influenced more than others. Ideally, individual employees and positions should be examined to see what undermines passion. It is interesting to note that an employee may be passionate about a job that would never inspire others. This suggests passion is not solely an employer-driven phenomenon. For example, some employees bring their positive outlook and passion for life to the job. A passion-enabled work environment is one that offers employees the ability to exercise control over their work, know what is expected, have meaningful work, feel a sense of contribution, and know that they are valued by management. If you recognize and appreciate employees privately and publically for what they do, and seek their input wherever possible, you'll create an environment that will add value for everyone.

Most supervisors know the importance of the EAO confidentiality guidelines, but fewer understand the *dynamics of perception* of confidentiality and how fragile it is. An EAO may have lock-tight confidentiality and be in complete compliance with confidentiality laws, but if a supervisor improperly discloses to others or makes mention of the name of an employee he or she referred, repercussions could undermine the perception of confidentiality and harm the EAO utilization. Reduced EAO utilization can increase risk to the organization. Reestablishing a strong perception of

confidentiality can take a long time. Supervisors can help the EAO by regularly encouraging use of the office; promoting the confidential nature of the office; and never making conversation, even to their closest or most trustworthy associates, about those whom they've referred to the EAO.

■ **I have an employee who is perpetually cranky. Why? I don't know. I'm used to it, but new employees do not take to this person well. Should I refer this employee to the EAO, or help new employees adapt?**

Cranky employees demonstrate a bad attitude and behave rudely toward others who interact with them. Employees sometimes adapt to difficult co-workers, and that seems to minimize the severity of the problem. This is your perception: new employees recognize the behavior as inappropriate, while you see it as being less serious. This behavior causes distress, and has a negative impact on productivity and worker health. There are many secondary negative effects associated with your cranky employee, so expecting everyone to adapt is not a good management strategy for this issue. You say you've adapted, but would productivity and work climate improve without this cranky style of behavior? Indeed, it would. Step out of the comfort zone you've created, collect proper documentation, discuss the changes you wish to see in this employee, and use the EAO as a resource to help. Expect resistance, but do not reinforce this behavioral problem by doing nothing.

■ **I called my employee 'narcissistic' in a corrective letter because it describes the behavior that I and others witness. I think this word is not diagnostic, just descriptive. Am I wrong? Will it cause problems in my documentation?**

There are many health-related terms that have found their way into everyday language. It is easy to forget that these words usually imply diagnostic labeling. They fail to sufficiently describe behavior, and therefore, are inappropriate for documentation. They can undermine administrative or disciplinary actions. Words like anti-social, neurotic, or depressive, for example, may be familiar terms used in conversations, but they will interfere with your goal of correcting performance. They may also invoke considerations under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Senior management is likely to reject your documentation if it includes this type of language. If your employee inflates his or her accomplishments, or fails to consider the needs of others, or are inappropriate or boastful, then say so. Support statements like these with examples. When you find yourself making a judgment about an employee's behavior, say to yourself, "By this, I mean _____." This will help you to avoid using labels and discover clear, descriptive terms instead.