

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **How can I earn more credibility with my work unit and team? I know many of them are far more knowledgeable than I am, yet I hesitate to let on how much I don't know. It's a Catch-22: I know the least, but I must lead a team of employees who know more.**

You can still establish credibility as a leader. Ironically, your first step is to admit what you don't know and ask for input. Many managers or supervisors have less knowledge about products, systems, and processes than those they supervise. Even if you were the one with more knowledge, the basics of supervision and leadership would be more important. Employees want you to show dedication to what they are doing. They want you to value their capabilities and help them strengthen their skills; they want to feel your passion about the job. Your employees want productive meetings, new opportunities, and in general, a supportive relationship with their supervisor. Find your employees' work-related needs and discover how to make their jobs more meaningful. You will be on the road to being the best leader they've ever had.

■ **I am a "nice guy" supervisor. I've been with the organization for 32 years. I don't monitor employees. I admit to feeling less motivated these days to be proactive with them, but I can't decide if I'm getting lazy, experiencing depression, or what.**

Does management have expectations for you to make tougher decisions involving your employees? If you are keeping up with their expectations, then your leadership is meeting their goals. Regardless, meet with the EAO for some guidance on these issues. The EAO can provide an assessment to look at the issue of depression. You may need to establish work goals and involve your supervisor to help you re-engage and get re-energized. In the meantime, be cautious. Employees who perceive supervisors as apathetic or unwilling to hold them accountable can tend to lower their productivity, increase absenteeism, and generally take advantage of that sort of leadership style. All of this can increase risks on many fronts.

■ **I have an employee who takes notes on my mistakes and records incidents when I get angry in the office. My relationship with her is a game that includes her resistance to or refusal of my requests. I want to let her go. She only laughed when I referred her to the EAO. Now what?**

Make an appointment for yourself to speak with an employee assistance professional. When supervisors reach the point of almost complete dysfunction in a relationship with a subordinate, anger, resentment, fear, and distrust can rule. This is a recipe for disaster. An adversarial relationship with your employee puts you and your organization at risk for severe problems, including violence, law suits, injuries and benefits abuse, and being present but not productive. Acting to suddenly discipline your employee may precipitate a larger crisis after such a long bout of unresolved conflict. So before going the discipline route, consult with HR first and then work with the EAO to see if improving the relationship is worth a try.

■ **There were a few employees I did not refer to the EAO in the past because I felt that they were too manipulative and dishonest and that they would easily snow the consultant. What's the argument for referring these employees?**

The EAO is not just a place for counseling employees. Moreover, it is a programmatic approach to resolving performance problems associated with troubled workers. This perspective is lost when EAOs are thought of only as offices where employees go to get help. Instead, it means that resources have been provided to accommodate the employee toward the organization's goal of resolving the performance or conduct issues. An important factor in the EAO Consultant's ability to be effective in these types of situations is for the supervisor to contact the EAO before making the employee referral. This helps the EAO to have the background and other side of the story before meeting with the employee.

■ **How might a supervisor play an innocent, unsuspecting role in an employee's decision not to follow through with treatment or EAO recommendations?**

Depending on the difficulty of the recommended treatment and the diligence required of the employee to be successful with it, a decision to not follow EAO advice is often based on the mistaken belief that it isn't necessary. The classic example is the employee with alcoholism who believes that prescribed treatment really isn't necessary in order to stop drinking. The employee may think, "I will just stop on my own." Family, friends, employers, and even strangers may be elicited to participate in passive discussions about self-control prior to such a final decision. They become unwitting co-endorsers as the alcoholic uses them as "sounding boards" to build support for his or her decision. These solicitations by the employee can be subtle and benign-sounding conversations. Supervisors willing to participate in such discussions are especially valuable in the employee's formulation of his or her rationale to quit treatment.