

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



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

- I support an inclusive workforce, and I wonder if older workers are more likely to burn out, struggle, resist new technologies, possibly have more illnesses, or get along poorly with younger supervisors. Should I be concerned?

Research demonstrates these stereotypes are not accurate. Older workers often get high marks for loyalty, reliability, and having a deeper network of contacts than younger workers who often must attend to and balance many more work-life demands. Older workers, because of their experience, may also understand much more about leadership, the doctrine of completed staff work, proper delegation of assignments, communication, relationship development, teamwork, listening, and the problem-solving process; in addition, they often have better writing skills. These days, workers of all ages have been exposed to technology. Workers in their 60s right now have used computers for decades. Understanding old technology makes it easier to understand newer technology. Developmental psychology tells us that the older we get, the more we are motivated to give back. You can learn more from the 2010 book, *Managing the Older Worker*, by Peter Cappelli, which is available at most online bookstores.

- My employees want to conduct an intervention with their co-worker who is an alcoholic. I support the idea, but they want to do it at work when the employee arrives. I declined to participate because I am not a peer, but I am also feeling a little nervous about this happening at work.

Workplace activities that you endorse, especially with regard to personnel matters, should be related to your organization's mission and functions; thus, there are many potential problems, legal and otherwise, associated with having an intervention at work conducted by employees. Despite perceived urgency and the well-meaning intent of co-workers, you should recommend they meet with the EAO and consider a better plan or approach. Do not put yourself in the position of having approved this activity. Interventions work, and they have received enormous attention in the media by way of books, fee-based services, and even TV shows. However, managers should not approve them as acceptable workplace activities for employees suspected of substance abuse problems, despite what they might see in the movies.

- None of my employees have indicated that they are having financial problems. Still, I know some of them must struggle with finances. How are money problems among employees different than other personal problems?

Typically, money is equated with power and status. Thus, for a person with financial problems, particularly overwhelming credit card debt, a terrible feeling of dread can drive a belief in personal failure. This can easily transfer into fear that one's job or reputation at work would be seriously affected if the extent of one's financial problems were known. Remarkably, research reported by the Personal Finance Employee Education Foundation shows that overall stress of the average employee could be re-

duced by 50% simply by resolving issues associated with financial stress. When you talk about the EAO to your employees, mention financial help. You may not see much of a reaction, but ears will perk up. Specifically, mention the EAO's ability to identify financial help resources.

Source: www.personalfinancefoundation.org

■ **My employee periodically refers to himself as an alcoholic but has been sober for 22 years. Why does he use this term?**

Many alcoholics in active recovery (*especially 12-step programs*) who abstain from alcohol and mood-altering substances refer to themselves as alcoholics or recovering alcoholics depending on whom they are with and the context of the social or occupational setting. The recognition that one is an alcoholic is not unlike employees who refer to themselves as diabetic even if the disease is well-managed. Many alcoholics believe their very next drink could be the one that leads to their death, because they have come so close to it in the past, tried so many times to get sober, or both. Their sobriety is, therefore, first and foremost. This attitude of awareness and gratitude is one of self-preservation. Practicing and feeling comfortable with describing oneself as an alcoholic is usually viewed as an important part of their awareness of who they are and the fragile nature of sobriety, and it is a reminder that they could lose it all tomorrow.

■ **Supervisors are not supposed to make conclusions or analyze their employees' personal problems when performance issues exist. Isn't this impossible, and doesn't it go against human nature? I always have an idea about what's contributing to an employee's performance problems.**

To wonder what is causing the decline in an employee's performance is natural. It's what happens next that can interfere with an employee improving his or her performance or getting help for a personal problem, if one exists. Frequently, supervisors test their theories or beliefs concerning the nature of an employee's problem by making simple inquiries. For example, "How are things going, Ralph? You haven't seemed like yourself lately." An inquiry of this nature puts the employee squarely in control of the dialog with the supervisor, the outcome of the discussion, and usually whether an EAO referral will follow. Sometimes, only through a professional assessment is the ultimate source of performance problems discovered.