

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



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

- **Are there any quick tips available for giving feedback to employees? Specifically, what is the best way of responding to defensiveness?**

Feedback is more complex than it first appears. Not only is there a process for giving feedback, but there is also an art to responding to defensiveness. Many employees do not relish constructive criticism, despite its value. Listen calmly to what your employee has to say and be understanding. You may not agree, but understanding the points he or she is making is key and their receptiveness is more likely to follow—helped by your active listening. Do not equate defensiveness with total denial or complete rejection. Your feedback should be objective. An employee may respond by asking, “Well...can you explain more about what you mean?” This is an indication that acceptance may be near. Your goal is not immediate 100% agreement with your feedback, but that your feedback includes things to be considered.

- **An employee says her husband is violent. She won’t go to the EAO because she thinks he’ll read her mind and know it. Some employees are worried for her, but he is the only spouse who has brought roses to the office! Frankly, he seems nice. What do you think is going on?**

There are many possibilities, but it is still appropriate to encourage her to visit or phone the EAO to discuss her situation. A sudden crisis or incident may increase her motivation, but if she is a victim of abuse, the reluctance you see now is consistent behavior with how victims of abuse sometimes react. The “battered spouse syndrome” frequently includes a belief or “omnipresent” feeling that the abuser is superior or in control of the victim. The victim may believe she is being watched. This PTSD-like response demonstrates true fear. Abusers sometimes demonstrate a pattern or cycle of growing tension, releasing it through abusing, blaming the partner, and then demonstrating remorse and overindulgence (e.g., bringing roses to the office) to make up for the violence. The cycle then repeats. As a supervisor you may benefit from consulting with the EAO yourself for help in determining how best to respond to this employee and any potential impact to the workplace.

- **As a new supervisor, I lack leadership experience and struggle with communication, delegation, and generally just trying to feel secure in my position. I admit to also feeling intimidated by those I supervise. Can the EAO help?**

Yes, the EAO can help. You are describing the need for some supervisory training, but additional issues you touch on are worth examining. These include anxiety, fear, and insecurity about participating in the supervisory role. All of these issues are surmountable, but “book knowledge” may be only part of your solution. Personal issues may interfere with your ability to apply whatever you learn. There may be certain skills that are more difficult to learn than others. It may help to seek consultation or coaching from another supervisor with experience to assist you. The EAO can lead you to information about the supervisory role and also help you to apply what you learn. There are many ways to acquire the material you seek

online or through books, as well as OHRD supervisor and management courses. As you improve your abilities and skills, the EAO can help you tackle periodic roadblocks to success and job satisfaction.

■ **We have a new supervisor who comes with a great reputation, but some employees feel she is too pushy and “on task.” I wasn’t hearing these complaints with the last supervisor. Maybe she is a bad fit, or perhaps it is the others who need to be more like her. What should I do?**

This conflict is not desirable, but it may signal the need for some employees to make changes. Instead of focusing on how to return to the status quo, recognize that this scenario may signal an opportunity that offers rewards to your organization. Discourage staff from running to you during this adjustment period, and be aware that even a passing “hallway venting session” with you and employees could undermine motivation for them to work matters out with her. Encourage your new supervisor to use the EAO for guidance on gaining acceptance for her supervision style. The EAO will help her determine how to proceed in managing the differences with her subordinates. In the end, this approach will allow the best chance for a “win-win” solution. You will be able to capitalize on your investment in hiring her and help those under her supervision make the changes needed to improve their performance and productivity.

■ **The EAO provides short-term problem-solving and counseling, but it refers people to psychotherapy. What’s the difference between the two?**

Counseling is distinctly different from psychotherapy, which is why mental health licensure and appropriate certification is required to practice psychotherapy in virtually every state. Counseling is problem-solving; it is often a discussion between a counselor and a client that addresses an individual’s concerns or struggles associated with life’s problems or issues. Psychotherapy is treatment for emotional problems where the relationship with the psychotherapist is a means (a tool) to help the client or patient make difficult changes in behavior, beliefs, and habits of thinking to improve their life functioning. Most people who go to therapy do so after experiencing much personal distress because the way they have always coped with or responded to life’s problems is no longer working.