

Employees—  
Your Most  
Valuable  
Resource

# Frontline Supervisor



Employee Assistance Office (EAO) – 608-263-2987 – [www.eao.wisc.edu](http://www.eao.wisc.edu)

■ **How can supervisors help employees maintain a positive mental attitude?**

If you have a good working relationship with your employees, you can impact the work environment by blending a positive approach into your supervision style. Here are some ideas: 1) When coaching, remind employees of their capacity to achieve. 2) Encourage employees to embrace personal growth opportunities within the organization and the community. 3) Encourage employees to think big when it comes to pursuing their goals. 4) When crises occur, model calmness and a level-headed response. 5) Encourage employees to develop their passions and find the professional niche that matches their talents and values. 6) Interrupt negative self-talk and reassure your employees that they have what it takes to succeed, which may help reduce their self-doubt. 7) Encourage employees to pursue work/life balance.

■ **I like the concept of “management by wandering around.” I read about it in a textbook, but I don’t think employees may like a supervisor who sneaks around in the workplace. Should I let employees know when I am coming? I think anything less will undermine trust.**

**Management by Wandering Around (MBWA)** is a supervision technique that is designed to be random or unpredictable. The idea is to better gauge work processes, issues, and problems by showing up unexpectedly. This includes catching people doing something “right” and provides support. No one truly knows where the idea originated, but scheduling visits would undermine its purpose. Letting employees know you involve yourself in this practice, however, would prepare them when you show up unannounced. Certainly there are employees who do not like surprise visits from management, but what they would resent more is you not caring at all. To make this practice more effective and less intrusive, create a tradition of doing it regularly, and engage with employees by listening to any ideas, complaints, and recommendations for improvements.

■ **My employee has been with our organization for a long time. He refuses many assigned duties as well as some that are part of the job description. I don’t think**

**Simply put, it appears** as though you are unable to direct the employee’s work. If true, then you have lost control of the employment relationship. Employees who have gained this sort of leverage over their employers create a lot of risk. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon. Entitlement thinking may lead to bullying fellow employees, breaking work rules, end-running managers, and using the organiza-

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**anyone in management is willing to consider termination.**

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■ **A young worker who I recently hired is energetic, inquisitive, accepts feedback, and has great ideas. Unfortunately, my office manager doesn't like her and is making comments about quitting. I am afraid of losing my office manager (who has been with me for 26 years!) because I am dependent upon her. How do I resolve the personality clash?**

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■ **Can you give me a checklist for counseling employees about their performance to reduce the likelihood that I will leave something out, allowing the employee to manipulate me by saying some element of our discussion was omitted?**

tion's property for personal business. Fear of the employee's reaction to confrontation and adapting to avoid it ultimately created this personnel issue. Document the poor cooperation, work refusal, etc. Make a referral to the EAO regardless of whether the employee accepts the referral. Also set up a consultation meeting for you and your manager with the EAO to identify a concrete action plan. In matters of this type, management teams that focus on a solution usually decide to draw a line and insist on change. The good news is that many are pleasantly surprised to find the situation can turn around!

**There may be** more to this problem than a personality clash. It appears the older worker may be feeling threatened by the younger employee and is resorting to the threat of resignation to manipulate you into reigning in the younger employee. This is not an unusual workplace conflict, but its resolution will elude you until you take charge as the senior manager. After 26 years, you have naturally grown to rely upon the office manager who seems irreplaceable. Your fear of losing her represents leverage to control you, and she is taking advantage of it. This dynamic probably did not emerge overnight. Consider whether you have reinforced this behavior by your reaction to similar threats in the past. Consulting with the EAO may help you face the uncertain outcome of reasserting your authority, help you take back the power you have given away to your subordinate, and free you from living in fear of what your employee will do if you don't please her.

**First of all,** consult with your Human Resource contact. Next, regarding a possible format for discussion, try the following checklist: 1) Ask the employee how things are going, and whether he or she is having any difficulty with assignments. You may be surprised at the self-awareness. 2) Discuss your concern, and any discrepancy between what you've observed and the employee's self-assessment. 3) Tell the employee exactly what expected outcome or result must be achieved. 4) Discuss specific examples of the performance issue in question and how it can be corrected. 5) Before ending the meeting, ask your employee to summarize his/her understanding of what needs to be accomplished. Failure to make this clarification will lead to a claim that confusion existed at the end of your meeting. You might send a summary email or memo to document what was discussed together.

*Note:* Prior to your meeting, consider your employee's essential duties and performance standards. Clarify and affirm that the expectations are reasonable, and advocate or make changes, as needed. Also, don't forget you can consult with management, HR, and the EAO.