

# Frontline Supervisor



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

---

■ **Why is it important for supervisors to understand bullying, what it looks like, and how it impacts the workplace?**

**Workplace bullying** harms employee health and reduces productivity.

Unfortunately, many supervisors misidentify bullying as personality conflict, disrespect, personality style, jealousy, insecurity, or one employee having a bad day. It is natural to minimize the significance of a problem if it otherwise implies we may be called upon to use significant effort to address it. The more benign explanation usually wins out. Investigate bullying as a possibility when you learn of employee conflict, particularly if you see a power disparity. One employee may have more tenure, clout, seniority, or recognition as the expert because of his/her prominence on campus. These dynamics make it difficult for victims to defend themselves because of their subordinate position, inexperience, lack of clout, or hesitation to be assertive.

---

■ **Why is domestic violence an issue for the workplace? Domestic means this problem is at home, not at work, right?**

**Three quarters of battered** women (men are also victims) report being threatened while at work by a partner or spouse. This leads to lost productivity, distractions, and absences from the workplace. Other issues also affect the workplace, like a violent partner coming to the job site. This can pose a grave threat, and many incidents of homicide in the workplace each year are associated with this circumstance. A former partner of a domestic violence victim may phone or come to the workplace to harass the victim primarily because the job site is a required, familiar, and predictable place for the victim to be. Less often considered, but also costly are employee batterers. They may be less productive, miss work, get incarcerated, or have unpredictable absences when stalking victims and getting into legal trouble. At work, batterers or stalkers may use work time to check up on their victims, or may spend lengthy periods of time on the phone processing and apologizing following battering incidents. A supervisor may never discover that domestic violence is linked to performance issues, but if you do, don't keep it a secret. Contact the EAO and consult on arranging a referral.

---

■ **From the EAO's perspective, what is the most common explanation**

**The most common** reasons cited by employees for why performance isn't improved include misunderstanding what the supervisor said or denying the request was made. When you interview an employee and

---

**employees give as to why they failed to make the changes in their performance requested by the supervisor in a discipline process?**

make clear the significant changes you want, you must put that information in writing and, just as important, follow up shortly afterward to clarify that the understanding remains. This eliminates “wishful listening,” also known as “hearing only what you want to hear.” Here’s the supervision maxim: Any unknown discrepancy between what you wanted and what the employee understood will grow larger as time passes between the original corrective interview and the follow-up meeting. Consult with your Human Resource manager for more information on documentation.

---

**■ What’s the most common mistake supervisors make when confronting troubled employees?**

**The most common** mistake is not doing it in time. Not confronting an employee as soon as an inappropriate situation occurs is one of the worst mistakes supervisors make. This does not mean the confrontation must include disciplinary measures at the moment. This is where the second mistake often occurs. Many supervisors link confrontation and discipline, they believe the two actions must happen at the same time. As a result, a supervisor may fail to confront an employee because the timing isn’t right, they’re busy, it’s the end of the day, or they simply don’t have the energy for one more thing on their plate. Barring an emergency, any of these are legitimate reasons for not having a meeting to correct behavior or performance, but not for delaying a brief conversation and arranging a meeting for a later time—that day or even several days later. The problem with not doing so is often its negative effect: unstated approval.

---

**■ Are supervisors always supposed to be positive, or can we show our true selves—our discouragement and pessimism—if that’s the way we feel as a result of workplace or organizational circumstances?**

**Any general article** discussing required skills, duties, and responsibilities of the supervisor will likely include praising, inspiring, team-building, and morale-boosting. Nothing should preclude you from being honest about the way you feel, but behaving in a manner inconsistent with these responsibilities undermines a positive work environment and can negatively affect productivity. Your employees deserve a positive leader even in the face of adversity. Leaders may not feel positive but they should always behave in ways that best serve their employees. You can contact the EAO to consult and discuss such feelings rather than share them with staff and possibly discourage them.