

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **My employee discusses many personal problems at work. One day it's health issues, the next day it's problems with her sister-in-law. It's bothersome to coworkers, and I fear it could influence some to leave the department. Should I refer her to the EAO? Is this a performance matter?**

Meet with your employee in private and express your concern about so many different things affecting her life. Give her a chance to respond. She may instantly realize that she is too talkative about personal issues. (Asking in itself may prompt change.) Sometimes problems like this are resolved in mere seconds. If not, share your observations about the frequency and effect of her multiple problems and suggest the EAO as a resource. If no changes are forthcoming, and self-referral to the EAO is declined, express your concerns directly about the work environment. Use documentation based on your observations of her interactions. The goal is to help her make changes and get help if issues in her life are serious enough to need counseling support.

■ **The problem of "presenteeism" (coming to work sick) is a serious one. Illnesses like the flu can have serious health impacts. Given that, is it appropriate to refer these employees to the EAO (when they get well) or even consider it a disciplinary matter?**

You and your managers should decide on the strength of a response to this problem. There is research that points to common reasons why employees come to work sick. One study found that presenteeism was associated with employees who had managers likely to grade their performance as lower or less satisfactory. Employees who come to work sick have also been shown to have more mental health issues, personal financial difficulties, work stress, and perceived work pressure from managers and coworkers who pressured them to come to work. Employees who come to work sick can, therefore, be symptomatic of more serious issues, internal or external. It is appropriate to refer an employee who repeatedly comes to work ill in order to help solve any underlying issues.

Source: theworkfoundation.com [Search: "sickness in the workplace"]

■ **How can I help employees cope with workplace demands that I don't have any control over? I can't manage their stress for them, so can you suggest what role I should play?**

No matter what type of stress employees experience—nearly all employees think about their careers and what they will be doing differently someday. Be realistic, but engage your employees in this topic from time to time, to demonstrate that you are mindful of the next steps for them in the way of skills, opportunities, continuing education, etc. Don't be a manager or supervisor who disappears on the job. When employees are stressed, feelings of isolation can

set in. Your energy as a manager and your influence can play a powerful role by breaking a naturally negative self-talk script employees are prone to play under stress. The point: Stay engaged. Develop relationships with your employees. Each one is different, and they will handle stress in different ways. Understanding workers under your supervision will allow you to offer support tailored to their individual needs. The managerial behaviors described above don't eliminate stress—they simply allow the employee's natural ability to cope with stress come forward.

■ **I caught our mechanic drinking a beer on duty. He quickly admitted he was an alcoholic, and said he was going back to counseling and AA. I was impressed with his sincerity and felt relief, so I let the incident slide. I thought, "Okay, he is on the right track." Was I wrong to do that?**

Yes. Your employee may have also been completely sincere. Sincerity, of course, does not translate to the proper treatment steps. You should have acted on our campus policy. How can you be manipulated at the same time your employee is being sincere? The answer lies in the nature of the disease. A crisis—caught drinking on the job—is enough for the alcoholic to experience a convincing sense of urgency (never-again determination) to stop drinking. However, the nature of the disease dictates its course, not willpower. This sense of urgency will dissipate with time and symptoms will return. The likelihood of self-referral to treatment is low, but it can be heartfelt and sincere in the moment.

■ **I am a new supervisor. I am sure there will be many challenges, but with all the different personalities of employees I supervise, how can I best help each one perform to his or her peak?**

Understanding that each of your employees will see you differently, will relate to you differently, and will need different things from you is the place to start. Many managers make the mistake of seeing their employees as "the troops." As such, they communicate with them as though they are Marines in a barracks awaiting orders. Take the opposite approach. It will take time, pay attention to how your employees are unique in five key ways: 1) Communication style and needs. 2) Career goals, hopes, dreams, education desires. 3) Motivation triggers and reward preferences. 4) Limitations, avoidances, and dislikes. 5) Leadership and problem-solving capacity. Understanding each of these five areas will help to maximize employee job satisfaction and productivity.