

Employees—  
Your Most  
Valuable  
Resource

# Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **Some employees are very up front about personal problems. I know we should not give advice or counsel employees, but I think too much listening can also be problematic. How much listening should a supervisor do?**

There are **two** problematic issues associated with listening to an employee's personal problems: one is giving advice, and the other is having too much personal information about an employee. The more information you possess about an employee's situation, the more responsibility you have to consider it when making decisions. Don't be fooled, the more you know, the more likely it is that this information will affect your decision-making regarding an employee. Some personal problems employees may have can be associated with disabilities under the Americans with the Disabilities Act (ADA). Supervisors must actively listen, but also learn the skill of setting boundaries, while maintaining a positive relationship with your employee.

■ **I believe I manage my own stress on the job well and stay positive with the health habits I've established. However, my employees are really stressed. I hesitate to overwhelm the EAO by referring them all. What role can I play to support my employees and reduce their stress?**

There are **several** ways stress can exhibit itself in the workplace. Most stress falls within three categories: daily strain, burnout, and disengagement. Each type of stress can benefit from different interventions. The EAO can consult with you on what role you might play in responding to each of them. Daily work strain responds best to health habits that mitigate stress, including diet, exercise, proper breaks, and stress management techniques. In this regard, there is nothing improper in sharing tips and successes you have experienced in managing stress. A positive attitude is contagious, and modeling it is a powerful way to influence your team. In addition, work to understand the specifics of any work stress; you may be able to support employees by setting realistic expectations. Always encourage employees to use the EAO, individually, in group presentations, or staff meetings.

■ **I saw the word "fear-based workplace" on a LinkedIn post. What does this mean, and how can I avoid this a negative workplace environment?**

An **article from** Bloomberg and NBC News went viral several years ago. The article discusses toxic characteristics of an unhealthy work environment and more importantly, what constitutes a healthy work environment. In fear-based workplaces, employees seek to satisfy management at the most superficial levels, such as working overtime just so they can be seen doing it. Gossip, warn-

ings of “watch your back,” and distrust are common. The emphasis is on what is expected today, not the successes of yesterday. Fear-based workplaces do not trust employees and seek to control communication using a strict top-down model. You won’t achieve good sharing of information in this environment because information is hoarded. Employees become “survivors.” Fear-based workplaces destroy creativity because they restrict spontaneity. The key message in fear-based workplaces is: Be thankful you still have a job.

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■ **I know my role as a manager includes promoting a positive workplace and championing diversity. How can I understand this role better and know where to begin?**

**Make a conscious** effort to observe the work environment for several weeks. This will produce insight and help you to focus more specifically on how you might engage employees as time goes by. Discuss your observations with your own manager and even the EAO. You will discover that your best resource for demonstrating the value of diversity is you—your modeling of appropriate and validating behavior. Observe employee interactions, lack of interaction, how employees group or isolate themselves, types of communication, body language, and social connections. Consider reading the book *“Cultural Competence for Public Managers.”* The book is a rich source of information, ideas, and direction. The supervisor is a powerful agent for influencing change, and one person can make a difference.

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■ **How can the EAO help me maintain high morale among my employees?**

**Maintaining high morale** is like tending to a garden. There are many things that go into it, however, having a keen awareness of your behavior and its impact on employees is most important. The one in charge is usually blamed for poor morale. Some of the most common behavioral complaints voiced by employees include: a supervisor is exercising too much control, being a micromanager, having a negative attitude, rejecting ideas from subordinates or not giving them a fair hearing, creating fear among employees, and playing favorites when distributing assignments. There are many examples, but, the underlying cause of low morale may be explained by the supervisor’s behaviors. The EAO can help you examine your supervision style and how to improve it. The promise is reduced stress and more job satisfaction for everyone, including you.