

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE OFFICE (EAO) – 608/263-2987 – www.wisc.edu/eao

■ **As a supervisor, how can I get more support from my boss?**

Does getting support from your boss mean improving communication, having your boss take time to listen to your concerns and then assist you in solving problems or back you up on key decisions? Lack of support is a common complaint among supervisors, but the starting point is to understand your responsibility in the quality of the relationship that you have with your supervisor. Examine your communication style and habits. Do you regularly exchange information? Do you solicit your boss's perspective on issues you must resolve? Do you ask for the benefit of his or her experience as you manage tougher problems? Finally, do you directly ask for support? Many supervisors are reluctant to participate in an active relationship with their manager because it demands vulnerability, trust, authenticity, and other engagement skills. They want support, but they have not laid a foundation for easily obtaining it. Talk with the EAO. The EA professional will help you discover steps you may not have taken yet toward a better working relationship.

■ **I had to initiate a disciplinary action, and my employee now gives me the cold shoulder. How do I address this passive anger that has suddenly appeared? Prior to the job action, an EAO referral was refused. I do not want to lose this employee.**

It is not unusual for an employee who has been disciplined to feel anger for receiving a disciplinary action, especially if he or she believes it was unwarranted or excessive. How your employee responds to a disciplinary action is a performance issue, not simply a personal matter. You want effective communication and acceptable levels of productivity from your employee. Meet with your employee and discuss his or her response to the disciplinary action. Define the response as a separate issue of concern. The objective is helping your employee deal constructively with the disciplinary action. Recommend the EAO again as a way to help him or her cope. Emphasize your expectations for a positive and productive relationship going forward.

■ **I consider myself very assertive, and I think it has helped me get ahead. However, in a recent, off-site workshop, I**

Assertiveness is like salt in a sauce, according to Daniel Ames, Ph.D., of Columbia Business School. "Nobody notices a problem with assertiveness unless there is too much or too little of it." Aspiring leaders who are low on assertiveness can't stand up for their interests, and they suffer by being ineffective at achieving goals and delivering results. On

learned that some of my colleagues feel I am too assertive. I was a little surprised by their feedback. Is there a happy medium?

the other hand, people with too much assertiveness may get their way, but only by choking off the relationships around them. Over time, the social costs undermine their efforts. Effective leaders push hard enough to get their way, but not so hard they can't get along. Awareness is key in the pursuit of control over assertiveness. Being able to ratchet it up and down as necessary is a valuable skill. Talk to the EAO about your assertiveness style. You will find an objective listener and get advice from someone who is not competing with you.

■ I was made aware of a work situation that escalated and eventually caused disruption to the work place. The truth is it had initially crossed my mind to intervene, but I dismissed it because I was so busy. Rather than blame myself, how do I reduce my stressful workload so I can avoid another occurrence?

When we are busy and under stress, it is easy to ignore warning signs or dismiss decisions we should make that would preempt problems. The problem for you to tackle is not necessarily the stressful workload. Your goal should be to increase self-awareness. This will empower you to stop, think, and act when needed. When you are more self-aware, you can make intuitive decisions more easily in the middle of fast-moving, complex situations, where little structure exists and things appear ambiguous. You are able to pay closer attention to "gut feelings" that are less likely to be overshadowed by all the activity and hustle-bustle around you. There are many exercises for increasing self-awareness. Check with your EAO to learn more.

■ I don't deny that stress is a significant issue for most workers, but I have never seen a report from our organization or any organization that links stress to direct costs for anything. So is the problem of stress overblown? Where can the costs of stress be seen?

Although it is not possible to say "employee stress caused the loss of X dollars to our organization," medical and social science research abounds with evidence that stress directly contributes to financial loss for employers. These costs tend to occur in four key areas: absenteeism, lost productivity, medical expenses, and turnover. Financial managers typically follow these financial costs closely, especially in larger organizations. For example, stressed employees are more likely to stay home and take "mental health days" as a way to cope. Stress can cause health problems, of course, but it can also make existing health problems worse, especially preexisting autoimmune disorders. Also, stressed employees can feel more powerless and are more likely to complain, file grievances, file lawsuits, have more accidents, make more errors, and experience more conflict? The list goes on. When you see evidence of employees under stress, think "How can the EAO help?"

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