

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **How can I get employees to come forward in a straightforward manner to discuss their concerns about the work unit? Some pout and complain to peers but in meetings never speak up. I think the behavior leads to morale issues and encourages similar behavior in others.**

■ **One of my employees was arrested for dealing cocaine. I didn't see any signs or symptoms of drug use. In fact, their job performance was strong. This employee never looked disheveled and seemed to be very bright and confident. What did I miss?**

■ **What makes a good manager of employees? What common traits do the best managers possess?**

Even if there are plenty of opportunities to raise concerns with you about the work unit, some employees will remain silent and seek to air their frustration with co-workers in gripe sessions. Doing so is a dependable way to gain sympathy, bond with peers, or join with others who do the same thing. Some of this is not harmful, and most workplaces experience some of it. A problem arises when this becomes a primary way of venting frustrations. These employees are keeping valuable information from you that could improve the efficiency and productivity of the organization or work unit. Encourage employees and meet with them one-on-one during the year. If permissible, consider adding “ability to share information and concerns” as part of their review, and establish standards for “outstanding” and “unsatisfactory” performance on this matter. Don't forget to consider a referral to the EAO if this problem isn't resolved. With assistance, you may be able to guide your employees toward the new behaviors you need them to acquire.

Although there are signs and symptoms of cocaine use, they can be difficult to spot. A cocaine user or dealer could appear as a strong and confident person. Drug dealers don't necessarily have a disheveled appearance or come from a low-income background. Drug-dealing individuals are usually not hurting for cash. Many, if not most, are privileged, middle class, and the suppliers and supporters of their friends' drug habits. They don't deal on street corners. The common denominator for recognizing the most subtle forms of drug abuse is how close you are to your employee during the workday and how frequently you directly observe his or her behavior.

The Gallop Organization has examined this issue quite thoroughly through a massive in-depth survey based on interviews and studies they conducted with about 80,000 managers. They arrived at a set of four characteristics worth knowing and thinking about. The four common denominators are: wanting to see employees grow and succeed; matching the right people with the right roles; defining desired outcomes while being willing to give people the latitude to accomplish them in their own ways; and focusing on what's best in people, not

what's worst. (M. Buckingham and C. Coffman, 1999, *First Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*.) What is interesting is that "attitude" of the supervisor is directly or closely associated with three out of the four. That's an argument for examining any personal issues you may have and how they help or impede your ability to be a good manager. Supervisors have a resource here on campus to help them address these issues – the EAO.

■ **One of the substances discussed in supervisor training was inhalants, like glue and other volatile materials. I can see alcohol and drugs being problems, but find it hard to believe that inhalants could ever be an issue in the workplace. Is this a serious problem?**

Inhalant abuse in the workplace is not common, but it can happen. Supervisors should therefore be knowledgeable. Nearly every workplace includes inhalants that can be abused. There are many types of inhalants, such as White Out, felt-tip markers, and aerosols. Almost any type of volatile substance can be abused. If a drug-addicted employee wants to get high and his or her drug of choice is not available, risk increases that the next most available mind-altering substance could be used. In 2012, a National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) report found that 15% of 8th graders had abused some sort of inhalant. Inhalants are the only substance of abuse used more by young people than by adults. However, age alone does not necessarily preclude participating in the abuse of inhalants. You can read the updated NIDA report on inhalant abuse at www.drugabuse.gov (search screen: "inhalants").

■ **One of my employees has an intimidating effect on others. This person is big, strong, deep-voiced, and smart—almost a charismatic presence. Most people stop talking when this person speaks. While I don't believe this is bullying, the negative impact is suppressing other people's ideas. How do I help my employees get past this?**

Meet privately with your employees. Share your observations and what you see as unwillingness to speak up and offer ideas or information in group meetings. See what feedback or explanation each offers. Your employees may need some assertiveness training. Start with this approach and observe what happens when employees behave more assertively. Is there acceptance and receptivity by the other employee? If not, a larger problem may exist. The EAO can consult with you about the management of this situation. Intimidation is a strong word. It implies that the behavior is filling your employees with fear, and as a result they remain uninvolved at meetings. If indeed this behavior is determined to be perceived as bullying, it needs to be addressed. An EAO consultation could advise you on ways to communicate your concerns.

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