

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **I am sure some of my employees smoke marijuana after hours, off duty. I have never suspected anyone of smoking it at work or of being impaired, but could our organization's higher-than-average accident rate be related to pot smoking, even if people are not coming to work high?**

■ **Do supervisors have any responsibility for helping employees manage anger in the workplace? Or is this a problem to address primarily by referring to the EAO? I see angry employees, and sometimes I step in because I worry about where anger might lead—for example, to a fight.**

■ **It seems like bullies in the workplace often have some type of power, even**

Hundreds of studies have demonstrated marijuana's adverse effect on behavior and performance. As a result, marijuana is a prohibited substance in virtually all drug-free workplace policies. What gets less discussion is the effect of marijuana withdrawal for heavy users. These withdrawal effects—observed by medical doctors, counselors, and researchers—include trouble sleeping, sweating, fatigue, mood swings, cravings, anger, insomnia, depression, and restlessness. Could these withdrawal effects contribute to an increased risk of accidents or lower productivity on the job? Indeed they can. For this reason, when conducting assessments with employees who are self-referred or referred by managers for performance issues, employee assistance professionals remain aware of signs and symptoms of substance abuse withdrawal. This is why an employee referral to the EAO for a performance issue can lead to treatment for a drug or alcohol problem, even though the supervisor never witnessed any obvious symptoms of a substance abuse problem.

Witnessing displays of anger in the workplace is a common experience for supervisors. Although your EAO is a key avenue for employees in need of help, your ability to properly intervene or positively influence angry employees is crucial. There is a financial and safety rationale for your role because it can prevent workplace altercations and conflicts that can lead to undesirable occurrences such as injuries, lawsuits, downtime, decline in morale, high turnover, and violence. You should not put yourself or your employees at risk. If an incident escalates, call 911. You can practice effective communication with employees, understand and address their frustrations, empathize with their angry feelings, keep promises you make to them, and, of course, know when to make a referral to the EAO. As a person with authority, what you say can have a powerful effect. Your EAO can help you acquire or improve upon these empathic and relational skills.

You're correct. Employees who bully often possess some degree of power—supervisory, tenure, delegated, indirect, or team leadership. Some bullies may perceive that or mistakenly believe they have power

if only imagined. Is this correct? What's the supervisor's role in prevention? Would training for employees help reduce risk?

or authority, and this alone is enough to prompt their aggressive behavior. Obviously bullies can exist anywhere in the organization, so conducting training to increase awareness is helpful. Supervisors should be aware that a bully can often be a trusted employee who is relied upon by the immediate supervisor for knowledge, expertise, and skills. He or she can be passionate and loyal to the organization. Nevertheless, if a supervisor becomes overly dependent on this particular employee, bullying behaviors may emerge, aided by the protection or special relationship the bully feels exists with the supervisor.

■ I once read that one of the most important jobs of a supervisor is helping every employee find his or her gift. What does this mean?

Leadership literature is not always about technical skills leaders must possess—documenting properly, resolving conflicts, praising, inspiring others, etc. It can also be about passion, values, self-awareness, having or developing a personal vision, integrity, wanting to teach others, and the desire to make a difference. With the personal awareness and energy that flow from these values and attributes, great supervisors demonstrate enthusiasm in helping subordinates discover their potential. This approach to supervision is positive and optimistic, and it is full of curiosity about what great things might lay hidden and undiscovered in the employees they supervise. This desire to invest in people and to champion their uniqueness is what separates great leaders from other managers, and it is easily spotted by those who hire and promote in organizations.

■ How can I hold employees accountable without making them feel that I am beating up on them or provoking them to get overly defensive?

Willingness to be personally accountable for one's self is learned, and it supports accountability in the workplace. However, you can have better success with holding employees to account if you have an effective relationship with them. Your view of accountability is important, so help your employees anticipate being held accountable. Be sure there is no ambivalence about the results you expect. Some supervisors see accountability as a measure of "blame" when things go wrong. Do you approach your employees with this orientation? If so, you may also communicate less effectively and less frequently. Remember, you can make willingness to be accountable a performance measure. Then if issues remain, make a supervisor referral to the EAO.

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