

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **I have an employee who is a superstar performer, but acts like a bully toward a co-worker. This co-worker has not complained and does not appear upset by the behavior. They seem to get along quite well. Should I leave this situation alone and not be concerned? Can the EAO help?**

Even though the bullying has not been reported, if you've observed it you should address it. Not all victims are reduced to visible anguish by bullies. Instead, they try to cope and suffer in silence. These employees can pay a big price in lost productivity and negative effects on their health. Ignoring your good judgment that a problem exists could jeopardize everyone concerned. Like sexual harassment, bullying is not always reported by victims despite their victimization, but if you know about it, you must address the problem immediately. Intervene and rely upon the reasonable standards of behavior and respect needed in the workplace as the basis for taking action. Act in accordance with your policies. As the supervisor, you can consult with the EAO regarding making referrals and appropriate next steps.

■ **I feel sorry for some of my employees. When I confront a performance issue, I probably demonstrate an overly sympathetic attitude of compassion and understanding. Is this undermining my ability to manage them effectively?**

Helping employees produce satisfactory work, along with having them feel happy about their contributions, requires clear management expectations. It also requires employees' believing that corrective measures will ensue if performance is unsatisfactory. Most supervisors don't understand the interplay between these two things. Love of a job is why many people come to work, but the need for job security is why they arrive *on time*. Without the reality of unacceptability and consequences for failure to meet performance expectations, nearly everyone would test boundaries and allow other personal interests to compete with the demands of the job. By overly sympathizing, you remove this important dynamic, and you send a message of leniency that reduces a healthy sense of urgency needed to perform productively.

■ **Employees with drug or alcohol problems exhibit patterns of trying to hide their affliction and put their best face forward. Doesn't this prove that substance abusers are not really in denial? We hear addicted people are**

Denial is a defense mechanism that does not preclude some awareness of the existence of a problem. In fact, some awareness is necessary in order to use denial as a defense mechanism effectively. Denial defends against the anxiety produced by evidence that a problem exists. That is its purpose. Denial isn't meant to fool you. It is to fool one's self. The evidence that this is true is found in the stories of recovering people who no longer abuse substances, and yet they have the ability to recall how they lied to themselves about the true nature of their problem during the time when it was most acute. For someone with no alcohol-related

in denial, but behavior contradicts that notion.

problems denial has an entirely different meaning. Denial for the addicted person is about a refusal to accept reality because it is too threatening. More accurately, denial is a refusal to consciously acknowledge what a person and others can plainly see is a problem.

■ How do I find out what motivates my employees? Most of them would say “money,” but that’s off the table. I wonder if my employees even know what inspires them. Are there any motivational strategies commonly overlooked by supervisors?

There are hundreds of nonmonetary strategies for motivating employees. However, it is hard to tell which strategy will work for which employee. Simply spending time with your employees is one way to gather an impression of what inspires them, and of course you should also ask them what motivates them. One link to motivation many supervisors overlook is information. A lack of knowledge about a task or job function often results in a lack of motivation to consider attempting it. So don’t overlook the obvious. Some experts argue that you can’t motivate employees and that they can only motivate themselves. This is only partly true. Don’t overlook a balanced approach of positive and negative reinforcement when it comes to motivation strategies. You will more likely match the needs of more employees. Why? You have two types of employees: Employee “A” pays a bill on time to avoid the possibility of a late fee, while employee “B” is desirous of positive feelings associated with keeping the desk clear of unpaid bills. Both drop the payment in the mailbox at the same time!

■ Periodically, we have employees incur back injuries on the job. Some get pain medications, which I know can be addicting. Although I haven’t noticed any employees affected by drug dependency, what are the symptoms?

Addiction to prescription pain killers, particularly the opioids, is a growing problem. One recent study showed that one in 12 injured workers using this class of pain killers became addicted. Addiction to pain medications is also linked to lower productivity, presenteeism (coming to work affected by health issues or severe troubles), and severe absenteeism. Those addicted to prescription pain killers miss 50 percent more work than non-using peers. Employees who become addicted to opioids have more difficulty returning to work as well. When they return, there is an increased risk of accidents, and they may illegally share medications with friends, become addicted to other opiates like heroin, “doctor shop” to find a willing prescriber, steal from the employer, sleep on the job, and suffer domestic problems resulting from addictive behavior in the home. Your EAO can be a key resource for intervention when performance and attendance problems emerge with recovering injured workers, no matter what the cause. For more information, go to <http://tinyurl.com/opioids-work>.

NOTES