

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **More of my employees are seeking better work-life balance. This is good, but it has caused some conflicts on the job. How can supervisors play a supportive role and encourage employees to live with balance, while still insisting on high standards of productivity?**

Seeking work-life balance is important, but for most employees, it is an ongoing process, not something that is “discovered” or achieved with finality. This means conflicts with the employer are bound to occur as employees make decisions to set limits on their availability. Improving work-life balance can be very difficult for some employees. Coaching may be needed to make any meaningful progress. Employees may face large obstacles requiring tough decisions after discussion and examination of their values, negotiating skills, and ability to be assertive or resolve conflicts at home. The EAO can help employees navigate these obstacles while reducing risk of jeopardizing the job or working relationships. Ask the EAO about work-life balance education for your employees. When you witness visible frustration, be sure to inquire about how you can help. Often employees stay silent, falsely concluding the employer has no flexibility, when in fact the opposite is true.

■ **One of my concerns about seeking help from the EAO is that I will be “analyzed” or that my past decisions will be scrutinized if I just want to talk about the problems I am having with an employee. Should I be concerned?**

EAOs would quickly lose their support from supervisors if, upon visiting, the supervisors felt as though they were under a microscope. The EA professional may ask you questions about your interaction with your employee to determine what has and has not worked in your attempts to correct performance. You may feel self-conscious about sharing this information if you have struggled to turn things around without much success. However, the EAO’s focus is on what you want to accomplish – not on analyzing you. Don’t hesitate to discuss how you can become a better supervisor with the EAO. EA professionals have, as their fundamental purpose, the role of helping supervisors. In fact, in their own “core technology” (a set of officially recognized components that define the profession), consultation with supervisors and management is mentioned first.

■ **How can I be the kind of supervisor who inspires employees? I am not the charismatic type. What communication skills or**

It is not necessary to be charismatic in order to inspire your employees.

You can learn how to help them be energetic, vibrant, moved to produce, willing to engage, and anxious to demonstrate that they are reliable, trustworthy, and loyal. Does that sound like a tall order? Start first by modeling and being an inspired leader. Let your employees see your

abilities are necessary?

excitement. If you are full of energy, it will be much easier to have it rub off on them. Tell your employees about your vision, your hopes for the work unit, and what excites you about the future. Let your employees know what a great job they're doing. Tell them how important their contributions are to the mission. Point out their strengths when you see them. Remain attentive to your employees' needs and meet often enough to know what they are. Go to bat for your employees and never have them thinking, "He/she doesn't know how tough we've got it." Instead, actually spend some time performing your employees' jobs so you understand their challenges. Set high standards and serve your employees. In return, they'll then serve the organization.

■ Many new employees get into trouble because they don't understand the work culture, the unwritten rules of communication, and the politics. Perhaps it's not fair, but should I coach employees on these matters or let them sink or swim and figure it out?

Whether or not they are fair and productive, politics, power, and communication nuances in organizations are a reality. Any lasting work organization will acquire unwritten rules of the road for how employees must behave in order to fit in. Naturally, being out of touch or discovering these things the hard way can break an employee's spirit. This makes it proper to orient your employees and coach or mentor them appropriately in the finer points of successfully navigating the work culture. Don't wait for your employees to have confusion, communication or performance problems, or conflicts first. Instead, give some thought to what these political factors are and make them part of your coaching discussions. This is helpful for employees and the work organization because it helps synchronize employee behavior with the organization's culture. Don't shy completely away from politics; instead, adapt with awareness and help your employees do the same.

■ My employee always argues with me when we discuss performance problems. This pattern is nearly 20 years old. Can the EAO meet with me and my employee with the goal of observing our interaction? I think feedback later might help this person see his difficult communication style.

You should meet with the employee assistance professional alone to discuss this conduct problem and the difficulty you have experienced in correcting it. Your employee demonstrates poor cooperation and inability to accept feedback. Long-term enabling has established an altered relationship where you have abdicated your authority and role as a manager. Expect correcting this problem to be more difficult than it first appears. Part of your discussion with the EAO will be how to establish new ground rules for your relationship. The problem you are experiencing is a common one, but with focus and support from the EAO you can develop a strategy for turning it around. You may eventually refer the employee to the EAO, but initially the burden of change will lie with you.

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