

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **I tend to shy away from conflicts at work and avoid them. Of course, I know issues underlying conflicts don't simply go away and larger problems can result. Still, I tend to avoid conflict when I can. What might cause supervisors not to face conflicts? How can we change?**

The main culprits in mismanaging conflict are often fear of anger or fear of feeling “connection.” Connection in this context means closeness and requires that you be open, honest and authentic as a partner in resolving conflicts. Supervisors may not be equally proficient in these relationship skills. For some people, genuineness feels risky, particularly if their personal histories include negative experiences with vulnerability. If you learned that conflict leads to violence or “bad things” happening, you may avoid it, deny it or delay in resolving it. Altering your behavior to accommodate conflict can lead to even greater problems. EAO consultants are experts at helping people manage conflicts. Learn more from these professionals if mismanaging conflict is an ongoing issue for you.

■ **Many of my employees have financial problems. Do employee financial problems put organizations at risk in any way? I think it would be extremely unlikely that any of my employees would steal, for example. So why should employers be especially concerned?**

It is estimated that 30 million employees face severe financial stress -- about 25% of the workforce. This figure is up nearly 300% from 30 years ago. The ways this stress affects employers are not readily visible, but they are substantial. The average employee with financial problems can lose up to 20 work hours per month dealing with financial issues. Financial stress is also linked to an increased risk of accidents. Accidents increase workers' compensation costs, and other ripple effects exist. Personal health can be grossly affected by financial stress. Sleep disturbance, hypertension, and anxiety are just a few examples. Many financially stressed employees seek part-time work; others quit for better pay. These are obvious turnover costs. Added burdens on workforce management professionals include dealing with garnishments, bill collectors, spouses seeking child support payments, and more. The EAO is available to help employees identify ways to cope with stress and also direct employees to community resources.

■ **What is the most powerful way that I can help employees feel valued?**

Not feeling appreciated can be a key reason employees quit jobs. This makes employee recognition programs popular. What often gets overlooked, however, is how appreciation can be expressed directly by supervisors. Don't rely solely upon your organization to do all the “thanking.” Engage in this practice and develop it as a skill. Learn how to make it effective. Also learn how to personalize praise by making it

This has a more positive impact. Thanking employees isn't just good for them; it also reinforces behaviors you want repeated. Never hesitate to ask your employees how they like to be thanked, and do not minimize your role in praising an employee for a solid effort. Overdoing it is harder than you think. Often employees complain, "I never get a thank-you from my boss." Don't let that be you.

■ **I have an excellent relationship with each of my employees. Despite this, our workplace environment is characterized by backbiting, gossiping, cliques and worker conflicts. We almost never meet as a group because I work better one-on-one with employees. Am I missing something?**

Employees benefit from regular opportunities for communication to process stress and identify group problems and solutions. Staff meetings are therefore important for maintaining good morale. Your one-on-one style is safe and effective for managing individual relationships but not for managing groups. If employees don't have regular opportunities to sit across from one another and process stress in an organized manner, you will see interpersonal conflict emerge. The more stressful and demanding the work environment, the more likely there will be conflict. Be cautious about identifying one member of the group as the one who "creates all the problems." This is a common occurrence among supervisors in your situation. Frequently one strong personality simply gets noticed more often within a group of co-workers in conflict. You must be willing to face your employees as a group as well as individually. Group meetings may be a bit frightening and may make you feel vulnerable, but there is no substitute for them. Seek input from your EAO on how to overcome your hesitation to use this approach.

■ **Helping employees feel satisfied with their jobs so turnover is low and helping them remain happy so they perform well are every employer's goals. Is there research that points to how that is most predictably accomplished?**

According to research, in every industry, occupation, or geographic region, "empowering or engaging" employees boosts morale and increases the desire to be productive. It holds true regardless of gender, job or culture. Empowerment is a closely studied dynamic with significant psychological effects on workers and a clear impact on the bottom line. Recognizing or improving your employees' work status, giving them authority to acquire resources and effect change, authorizing them to make decisions, giving them delegation authority, etc. -- these controls relieve stress and free up creativity. Find these opportunities in your employees' positions and you'll discover the magic effect of empowerment on your employees' job satisfaction.

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