

Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **There is obviously more to listening than being available and attentive to what employees say. On my annual evaluation, I received a poor rating on my listening skills. What are the key issues supervisors miss with regard to listening to their employees?**

A key measure of success in how well you listen to your employees is how they feel about you, and themselves, once you are finished meeting with them. Consider the common behaviors of managers who gain the trust of employees who come in search of a listener. When listening, do you show that you welcome the employee? Do you offer a smile or demonstrate a thankful attitude that your employee has come to call? Do you avoid interruptions and splitting your listening time with other tasks? Do you actively listen to employees? (Some supervisors listen to employees like a radio — hearing, nodding, but never looking up at them as they busy themselves with other tasks.) Do you validate the legitimacy of your employee’s viewpoint, even if you disagree with it? Do employees leave a meeting with you feeling they are important and valued? To become a good listener, see this responsibility as an essential function alongside things such as budgeting or strategic planning. Doing so will produce happier employees and great returns.

■ **Is there an “attitude” about supervision that you recommend supervisors adopt? By attitude, I mean a framework or model that reduces distress in supervision relationships and makes them more collaborative.**

Many supervisors visualize the role of supervisor as “unilateral,” or one way. The supervisor is “directing” and the employee is acting on that direction. This is too simplistic. A mutually beneficial would include both you and your employee meeting your goals. This model of supervision will make your relationships with employees more cooperative and productive. Most supervisors want to guide employees, maximize their productivity, and help them develop and feel rewarded for the good work they do. But it is important to see yourself as teaming up with your employee. “How can we cooperate with each other?” or “What do we need to work on to achieve results together?” is a proactive framework to supervision. Supervisors who practice this model will experience more cooperation from employees, less stress, and more joy in their work.

■ **A lack of communication is a bit of a problem within my work division. I harp on people to share information more efficiently and frequently,**

When communication is problematic and the flow of information is poor, search for barriers and intervene around them. Frequently, barriers are physical or rooted in inefficient communication channels. But that is only scratching the surface. Barriers to communication in organizations can arise from attitude problems, poor supervision, personality conflicts, language differences, culture clashes, personal problems, and more. This

but invariably everyone reverts back to their old habits. These are “people issues,” so can the EAO help?

is where the EAO can provide an added dimension of help. Consult with your EAO to see if you can discover potential behavioral or human-factor-related dimensions to this problem. Many EA professionals are educated in communication dynamics and have plenty of experience in understanding the role of sender and receiver, tangible and intangible barriers, and interventions to improve communication. This may sound unconventional, but EA professionals often can address problems of this type due to the perspective they offer and the unique set of operational parameters that set them apart as effective problem solvers when looking at human behavior in the workplace.

■ How can I help employees experience less stress regarding change in our organization? “Managing change” seems to be a buzzword phrase these days. Can you discuss a practical strategy to help us feel more in control over what feels uncontrollable?

Whether it’s an organization or an individual employee facing change, stress can be reduced by remaining proactive in the face of certain or unknown change rather than reacting after the fact. Experiment with the following proactive model: Meet with employees if significant change is pending. Have a frank discussion about resistance to change — how resistance is normal (but undesirable) and how it could undermine the work group. Discuss both what is feared about the change and what new opportunities or rewards are presented. Next, discuss strategy. How does your group “get ahead” of the impact and prepare to exploit the positive aspects of the change? Finally, in the face of stress, how will your group support individual members who may experience more stress from the change than others do? Consider how the EAO can serve as a facilitator for such a discussion.

■ In addition to reading about what it takes to be a good leader (or learning from my mistakes), what other strategy is particularly effective in acquiring leadership skills?

One commonly overlooked strategy of leadership development is modeling. Consider observing effective leaders within or outside of your organization. Attempt to model what they do. Nearly every manager can spot an effective leader, but being able to identify and describe what you are looking at can be a little trickier. When modeling others, seek to identify what attitudes they bring to workers and how they support the organization’s goals. What beliefs and values appear to support their effective leadership style? Where do they place priorities? What do they do that attracts others, and what causes those around them to respond positively? Perhaps most important, how do they reciprocate with others in the organization so they appear to both lead and value everyone around them?

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