

# THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

*Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource — Employees*

BluePrint for Health® Employee Assistance Program 651-662-0900 or 1-800-432-5155

■ There is much pessimism in the news regarding how employees feel about their jobs and their employers. Even I feel it. I am only one supervisor, but what can I do to promote a positive attitude at work?

Although increasing work and economic stress, along with loss of loyalty to the employer, is often reported, the news is not all bad. Research shows that a majority of employees do feel engaged in their work, although more so in smaller companies. This sentiment may result from feeling that they have more control over their work. So, the more you can help employees feel a sense of control or ownership over their work, the better off they will be. Many companies wonder what managers or supervisors can do to improve their workers' attitudes. Less frequently asked is what they can stop doing. A Harris Interactive poll in late 2004 showed that only 63 percent of supervisors and managers cared about the fate of their employer. Unless a supervisor cares about the employer, it will be difficult to influence morale in subordinates. Examine your speech and determine whether you periodically demonstrate an unhelpful attitude that contributes to the problem you are trying to solve. If you are exhibiting a continuous, negative attitude, you should head for the EAP; they can help.

■ One of my concerns about seeking consultative help from the EAP 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?

EAPs 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 EAP'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 EAP. 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.

■ I consider myself very assertive, and I think it has helped me get ahead. However, in a recent offsite workshop, I learned that my colleagues feel I am too assertive. I was surprised, but is there a balance?

"Assertiveness is like salt in a sauce," according to researcher Daniel Ames, Ph.D, of Columbia Business School. "Nobody notices a problem with assertiveness unless there is too much or too little of it." Aspiring leaders who are low on assertiveness can't stand up for their interests, and they suffer by being ineffective at achieving goals and delivering results. On the other hand, people with too much assertiveness may get their way, but only by choking off the relationships around them. Over time, the social costs undermine their efforts. Effective leaders push hard enough to get their way, but not so hard they can't get along. Awareness is your best weapon in the pursuit of control over assertiveness. Being able to ratchet it up and down as necessary is a valuable skill. Talk to the EAP about your assertiveness style. You will find an objective listener and get advice from someone who is not competing with you.

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■ In my pursuit of being the best manager I can be, my biggest challenge has been seeing problems before they happen — identifying early trouble in the decisions made by those I supervise. Is this an art or a skill?

As you manage employees over time, you may feel uncertain about the course of action or solution offered by an employee. You're not predicting the future. Instead, your accumulated knowledge is working for you to create uncertainty, causing you to act. This is a skill. Unfortunately, for most managers, these sensations may be so subtle as to be dismissed; so, the challenge is spotting them and acting on them earlier. Train yourself to gauge your level of certainty or uncertainty sooner, rather than learning from costly mistakes. As the following: "How certain is my employee about what he or she is doing or proposing?" "What do I need to do, say, or ask in order to get past these feelings or uncertainty?" "has this employee answered all of my questions, or are the answers incomplete or skirted. Avoid accepting solutions to problems you know aren't viable with the idea of fixing problems later if they occur.

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■ Should I come to the EAP with my employee for conflict resolution? He and I are always at each other's throats. I think it would be useful, because he could discover that I am right. For this reason, I don't fear conflict resolution.

Although it may initially sound like a good idea to engage the EAP in conflict resolution with your employee, to do so puts you and your employee on equal footing, and it can make matters worse. Many supervisors do not like the feelings associated with power, authority, and control. They compensate by trying to negotiate, be friends, or act "equal" to their subordinates. This can have a powerful enabling effect because it gives employees choice in whether they will accept direction. Because supervisors must perform their jobs, conflict ensues. You are not equal to your employee. You are superior in your responsibilities to the organization, and you must lead. It is better to go solo to the EAP and work out how you will gain back the control your organization wants you to have so you can accomplish its goals.

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