

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource -- Employees

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota Employee Assistance Program 651-662-0900 or 1-800-432-5155

■ I see a fair amount of disrespect between coworkers on the job—things like backbiting, name-calling, gossip, and being inappropriate with jokes. I attribute it to stress and the economy; after all, employees need to vent a little, right?

Don't be fooled, it isn't the stress, and it isn't "just the nature of the business." If backbiting, name-calling, gossip, and general nastiness are the norm where you work, then you've got yourself a respect problem—one that you need to get a handle on yesterday, if not sooner. Few things buy trouble like excusing bad behavior. Left unchecked, disrespectful interactions feed on themselves, growing into a culture of personal conflict and simmering resentment that will eventually undermine your mission and productivity. No one wants to work in such an environment, and your best employees certainly won't. They'll leave, and you'll be stuck with the mess. Respect is an institutional mind-set that must be promoted and practiced from the top down. As a manager, you're on the front line in this struggle, and although it can be daunting, you have the influence and control to stop it.

■ How can I be better at documentation? I've been criticized for not sticking to the facts when I write, but if one of my employees demonstrates a continual pattern of conflict with others, I would say the "facts" are that the employee has a conflict-ridden personality.

Good documentation is clear, useful and measurable. To make your documentation more effective, imagine you are in the bleachers of a stadium, observing the behavior of people down below. Simply record the what, when, how, and where. You may have a strong desire to include a psychological conclusion in your documentation, especially if you have observed the behavior for very long. However, you are not an expert on your employee's personality no matter how long you have observed the employee's behavior. You can see and hear conflict on the job, but you can't see your employee's personality. Many supervisors don't understand that they do not need to arrive at a conclusion for documentation to be effective. Documentation that focuses on the underlying causes of behavior (also called armchair diagnosis) will attract the focus and attention of the reader and will undermine your objective—correction of the problematic behavior.

■ I have many employees and I must ensure that they stay motivated. I know employees have to motivate themselves and that I can't do it for them. So what is my role in the process? How do I play an influential part in motivating employees?

It has been said that motivating a large group of employees can be like herding a group of cats. Each one is an individual, and therefore you must look at employee motivation in much the same way. Motivating the employees you supervise starts with getting to know them as individuals. This doesn't mean you probe them for personal information. Instead, it means spending time with them individually, getting to know them at work, discovering their likes and dislikes in the general course of a workplace relationship. Through this process, your employees will perceive that you care about them, and this is crucial to creating an atmosphere where motivation flourishes. Eventually you will get a strong feel for the ways each of your employees can be motivated, and you can plan opportunities and rewards that fit these unique aspects of their motivational profile and personality make-up.

■ I still find myself resistant to making referrals to the EAP, even after receiving training from the EAP. I am still guessing which employees need it and which ones do not. Is this unusual?

There are a few challenging situations new supervisors don't expect when learning to use the EAP in supervision. For example, the referral of an employee to the EAP whose performance alternates for weeks or months between "satisfactory" and unacceptable" might be delayed for years. Likewise, an employee a supervisor believes will feel ashamed or stigmatized by a referral to the EAP may grow more dysfunctional while a referral is delayed. Eventually a crisis may ensue compelling the referral. Finally, supervisors may delay referral of employees they know well, whom they think they can influence. A referral can be delayed as lectures or persuasive coaching sessions by these supervisors create short-term improvements in performance that don't last. When you notice these patterns, it's time to consult the EAP.

■ I want to make a good impression on my employees now that I am their new supervisor. What will employees focus on most as they "size me up" over the next several months?

Your employees will pay attention to what you say and do, but what they see will make a stronger impression. Many supervisors make the tactical error of focusing on impressing employees with their knowledge in the quest to gain respect. However, rule number one is to be a visible worker who puts in a full day and comes to work on time. If you demand excellence from employees, be sure to hold yourself to the same standards. Nothing will sow resentment faster than being absent from pitching in to accomplish the work, especially if your office or shop is in the same location. If you are not a visible supervisor, communicate frequently with employees so they can understand the goals and objectives you are pursuing. Gaining respect works on the law of attraction, and this "pull" strategy will work more successfully than a "push" strategy that demands or attempts to impress employees into recognizing you.

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