

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

■ I view myself as a tolerant person, but I admit that I am not comfortable with text messaging as a workplace communication tool. In my view, this is a faddish thing for weekend socializing. Is this my problem, or do I need to “get with the times”?

Text messaging is getting more attention in business literature as “Generation Y” workers who are comfortable with instant message (IM) communication enter the workplace to find older peers or managers uncomfortable with it. Being open to change is valuable, but not every new convention requires you to adapt to it. Although learning to text message may have some useful business applications, it is appropriate to expect employees skilled in the technique to rely upon conventional communication methods if those work best for your organization. The call to understand, adapt, change, and get with the times are big stressors for managers and employees alike, but some things do not change. One of them is the need for effective relationships and good communication that will produce results for the bottom line. This is an argument for everyone old and young alike, to be good communicators. The good news is that young people today are an upbeat, empowered, ambitious, and eager-to-learn group of folks who value honesty. So you can anticipate their cooperation.

■ One of my employees is resigning from the company. I am glad because this person has been slow moving and under-performing for a long time. I blame myself because I adapted to the performance issues as they grew worse, rather than intervene. How can I prevent this happening in the future?

The easy answer is start earlier in confronting employees with performance issues; but this may be too simplistic to inspire you to change. To help you act sooner, ask yourself what parts of your current job you dislike the most and if those things are related to employee performance issues. Do you dislike dealing with angry customers? Do you dread meetings with your boss to explain low production numbers? Do you work extra hours away from your family to catch up? Are other workers angry over the leniency you've shown? These are only a few outcomes from this type of neglect. Some managers believe that if they can cope with an employee's poor performance, then nothing needs to be done about it. They forget that lower revenue, sales, and profitability, along with mass departure of high-performing employees, are consequences of allowing poor performers to continue. The issues snowball. Talk to your employee assistance professional to learn more and to overcome your reluctance to confront employees.

■ My employee isn't insubordinate when I make a request, but there are always complaints, resistance to details, problems with timing and criticism about my communication. After all this, the employee delivers superior performance. How can I manage this?

Although your employee is great with a task, you are not describing superior performance. Quarrelsome behavior interferes with orderly workflow and is therefore serious. These kinds of communication patterns between managers and subordinates are not unusual. They can take years to develop and can become habits that are difficult to break. They are comparable to the bickering communication patterns found between spouses and over time the psychology that influences them can be similar. Still, you may agree that the relationship is valued. Beyond requiring that the quarrelsome behavior stop, establish new rules that must be followed and that will permit orderly discussion of work issues. The requirement that your employee put concerns in writing, for example, or share them only after you are finished speaking, may impose an intervention that produces its own cure. But the most important part of your strategy is looking at how you contribute to its perpetuation and wanting change badly enough to follow through. Consider using the EAP for some coaching assistance.

■ My employee went to treatment for a drug addiction problem. I'm glad the employee is in treatment, but if this person relapses, who will know it first — the EAP or me? Will the relapse appear as a performance issue or with physical symptoms that demonstrate drug use?

A relapse could be discovered through an EAP follow-up interview, by you witnessing the employee's behavior on the job, or even by a third party phoning someone with the bad news. Unfortunately, the desire to prevent or predict relapse by those in relationships with substance abusing persons does not lend itself to precise formulas. There are some common denominators, however, that prove helpful in prevention. For managers, staying focused on performance and detaching from concerns about what is going on in recovery is one. From the EAP's perspective, helping the employee remain motivated to participate in activities that aid recovery and to avoid those things that will impede it are crucial. The rest is up to the employee. Relapse can occur suddenly without warning, demonstrated for example by a sudden absence from work. But relapse can also be secretive, with controlled use of a substance hidden from others for weeks or months.

■ Our organization has developed a policy on bullying behavior. Can you provide an outline for a private corrective interview with an employee who has this problem and what steps to take?

Documented complaints and your personal observations should accompany you to your meeting. Start by explaining what's prompted the meeting, and share what has been observed and reported. Describe the effect of the behavior on morale and productivity. If employees feel dread in anticipated interaction with the employee, let the employee know it. It could have a big impact on motivating change. Do not joke or make light of issues in this corrective interview. Doing so will undermine your outcome and perpetuate the problem behavior. State that the behavior can't continue. A bully likes to discuss others' personalities and motives. Avoid this discussion, but do ask what your employee thinks about his or her interaction with others. Be patient and listen, but focus on what the employee can do to improve interaction with coworkers. Make an EAP referral and schedule a specific date and time for a follow-up meeting. Retaliation toward coworkers in response to your meeting is bullying behavior too — expect it to not occur.

NOTES: