

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

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

May 2006

Q. We employ an ethnically diverse mix of people. While there's no evidence of racism here, I sense trouble brewing. Is the EAP able to promote tolerance or cross-cultural awareness?

A. There's no single cure-all to create harmony in an ethnically diverse work environment. But the EAP can serve as a safe and effective outlet for individuals to express their work-related concerns or frustrations. Complaints of discrimination, however, should be addressed through human resources or management. If employees feel resentment toward others, they can vent to the EA professional and develop new ways to address interpersonal hostilities. For instance, they can learn strategies to improve how they collaborate in teams and look beyond their differences to achieve a greater good. At the same time, management can play a role in bringing a diverse workforce together. By setting an example of tolerance, fairness, and mutual understanding, the organization's managers can send a message for employees to follow their lead. It's precisely when trouble is brewing that these leaders should speak out about the need for equality, empathy, and shared goals.

Q. One of my best workers seems more lethargic lately, and her error rate is increasing. She says she's "sleep deprived," but she refuses to take the sleeping pills that her doctor prescribes. Can the EAP help her?

A. The EAP can help her grapple with her work performance issues, but it won't replace the role of her medical doctor. It is important that she discuss her sleep difficulties and other health matters with her treating physician. Her resistance to taking prescribed medication may be something the EAP can discuss with her. Sleep problems can sometimes mask other ailments, so it's the doctor's job to examine the patient, review her medical history, and make a more complete diagnosis. The EAP can work hand in hand with the doctor to provide support and encouragement so that the employee sticks to the treatment plan. It can also help motivate her to regain her stature as one of your organization's best workers. As a reminder, when making a referral, be sure to base it on the performance, not on the sleep problems.

Q. Some people have the skills to supervise employees, but don't use them. Their personality may simply be passive and nonconfrontational. I know the EAP can teach skills, but what if a supervisor seems unable to put these skills to use? Are situations like this hopeless?

A. Our personalities are not set in stone. People can change. The key is paving the way for them to modify their behavior in a constructive way. So there's hope in your situation, as long as the supervisor—under expert guidance—explores his or her personality traits in more depth. The EA professional is equipped to help the supervisor evaluate any long-term issues that cause the

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types of behavior that you've observed. The EAP can also refer the supervisor to a mental health professional who can analyze the individual as a whole and provide fresh insight into the shaping influences that have led to passivity and fear of confrontation. Through this process, the supervisor can gain psychological awareness that, in turn, will set the stage for skill development.

Q. After five years, I've grown disillusioned with managing people. It's too exasperating! Any ideas on how I can transition out of a supervisory role without taking a demotion?

A. Many supervisors throw up their arms from time to time with the frustrations of the job. Even the best supervisors experience "people problems" that can lead to burnout. After investing five years in your current role, however, it may be worthwhile to discover what's driving your exasperation, so that you can assess your situation with greater clarity and perspective. The EAP can assist you in identifying the core issues that you're facing—and what steps you can take to derive more satisfaction from supervising employees. You may learn that you're less willing to trust people or put faith in their capacity to improve. Or you may find that you've lost confidence after making personnel decisions that backfired. The EAP can help you step back, analyze the factors behind your disillusionment, and take action to regain your enthusiasm—before you take drastic action and bail out.

Q. When I lead staff meetings, I notice that people don't listen to me. They talk among themselves and don't treat me with proper respect. How can I command attention without alienating them? I don't see this happening with other supervisors, and I can't determine what they do differently.

A. Employees will listen to you more respectfully if you apply savvy communication skills. For starters, never talk over others. If staffers talk among themselves, keep quiet. Your silence sends a message that you're going to wait until everyone's paying attention. When you're addressing your team and you suddenly notice a pocket of chitchat among the group, stop mid-sentence and stare at the talkers until they stop. Another technique to induce people to listen to you is to build suspense. Examples: Pose a dilemma and promise to resolve it at the end of the meeting—or withhold the latest sales figures until after you give employees a chance to guess. (You can give a fun gift to the winner.) Also, use your voice well. Vary your volume and tempo so that you don't lapse into a monotone. When you're about to share critical information, experiment with the technique of speaking softly so that everyone must listen carefully to hear what you say.



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