

# FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

Spring 2016

## In this issue:

- Enabling Behaviors
- Promoting Positivity and Championing Diversity
- Maintaining High Morale
- How Much Listening Is Too Much



## Enabling Behaviors

**Q. Most people think of enabling as protecting a worker by covering up for mistakes, loaning money, making excuses, and other classic examples. What other enabling behaviors do supervisors exhibit that may be more subtle? Also, what drives these enabling behaviors?**

**A.** Most supervisors' enabling behaviors serve one overriding purpose — to decrease the stress of the supervisor's job by minimizing the perceived severity of the behavioral issues the employee exhibits. To show how veiled yet potent these enabling behaviors can be, consider the following: (1) downplaying inappropriate behavior; (2) ignoring red flags that signal there may be trouble; (3) being agreeable, accepting excuses, and not making waves; (4) minimizing a troubled employee's problems when speaking with one's superiors; (5) giving reassurances to employees when they come to discuss personal problems that signal a need for referral to the EAP; and (6) doing extra work to help out because of the employee's inability to perform.

## Promoting Positivity and Championing Diversity

**Q. I know my role as a manager includes promoting a positive workplace and championing diversity. How can I understand this role better and know where to begin?**

**A.** Get the lay of the land by taking time to observe the work environment for several weeks. Make it a conscious effort. This will produce insight and help you focus more specifically on how you might engage employees as time goes by. Discuss your observations with your own manager and/or the EAP. You will discover that your best resource for demonstrating the value of diversity is you—that is, your modeling appropriate and validating behaviors. Observe employee interactions, lack of interaction, how employees group or isolate themselves, types of communication, body language, and social interactions. Consider reading the book "Cultural Competence for Public Managers." The book is a rich source of information, ideas, and direction. The supervisor is a powerful agent for influencing change, and one person can make a difference.

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## Maintaining High Morale

**Q. How can the EAP help me maintain high morale among my employees?**

A. Maintaining high morale is like tending to a garden. There are many things that go into it, but having a keen awareness of your behavior and its impact on employees is by far the most important thing. Employees almost always blame poor morale on the one in charge. Some of the most common behavioral complaints voiced by employees include: that a supervisor is exercising too much control, being a micromanager, having a lousy disposition (irritability), rejecting ideas from subordinates or not giving them a fair hearing, creating fear among employees, and playing favorites when giving out cushy assignments. There are many more examples, but almost always, the underlying cause of low morale is explained by the supervisor's behaviors. The EAP can help you examine your supervision style and how to improve it. The promise is reduced stress and more job satisfaction for everyone, including you.



## How Much Listening Is Too Much?

**Q. Some employees are very up front about personal problems. I know we should not give advice or counsel employees, but I think too much listening can also be problematic. So, how much should a supervisor listen to employees' problems?**



A. There are two problematic issues associated with listening to employees who bring their personal problems to you as their supervisor: one is giving advice, and the other is having too much information about their personal problems. The more information you possess about an employee's situation, the more responsibility you have to consider it when making decisions. And don't be fooled—the more you know, the more likely it is that information will affect your feelings about the employee. Judgments about how to manage performance will be affected. Some personal problems employees possess can be associated with disabilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and knowing about those problems places you in the position of having to act properly to give them due consideration. Supervisors must listen to employees, but they must also learn the art of cutting a conversation short (for example, by using language such as "Jim, I get the picture. Let me recommend that you visit with the EAP," and "let me give you the number," or "here, use my phone so you can make an appointment").

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