

FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

Summer 2016

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Attitude Problem Intervention

Q. How can supervisors intervene with attitude problems, bickering, and morale problems among a large group of employees? Should I have a large group meeting to air out the issues?

A. Remember this rule: If employees are bringing their concerns and complaints to you, they are less likely to bring the same complaints and concerns to their peers. Appreciating this dynamic can help you stay proactive in developing effective relationships with employees. Start by reaching out to employees individually to interview and engage with them, in order to gain clarity about the problems your work unit is experiencing. Do not have a large group meeting, because you may never uncover the nature of squabbles that commonly develop among subgroups. Depending on how quickly you meet individually with employees, you may notice more calm and less negativity—this is only temporary. The next step is acting on and responding to the issues brought to you in these meetings. Establish a feedback process to gauge the impact of implementation. Consult with the EAP to have an EA professional validate your analysis and the conclusions you've arrived at regarding solutions.



New Supervisor Mistake

Q. I am a new supervisor. I can see right away that I am the one “in the middle”, with my supervisor above me and the employees below me each needing different things. What is the number one mistake I am likely to make as a new supervisor?

A. The number one mistake you are likely to make as a new supervisor is failing to see your role as a “teacher” instead of a “cop.” This slipup results from stereotypes you might hold of what supervisors do, insecurity about your supervisory skills, and fear of not being taken seriously. To reduce the likelihood of making this mistake, develop individual workplace relationships with everyone you supervise. Begin to understand five things about each employee—what their key skills are, what they want to learn more about, what motivates them, how much feedback they want or need, and their preferred form of communication. Down the road, check in to ensure these assessments are indeed correct. This will prevent a “barrier” forming between you and your employee caused by slow, simmering resentment toward you for not meeting his/her needs. If you are unsure about how to approach employees or communicate with them, sit down with the EAP and devise a plan or approach before things get worse.

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Self vs. Formal EAP Referral

Q. Should a supervisor always seek to motivate an employee to self-refer to the EAP before making a formal referral, aside from referrals for serious work rule infractions like a positive drug test, violent incident, etc.?

A. Supervisor referrals are based on performance, conduct, attendance, attitude, or related behavior issues. In the course of supervision, a performance problem might be identified, and typically the supervisor offers guidance to correct it. If change isn't forthcoming, the supervisor's suggestion to use the EAP may come next. This in turn may lead to a formal referral if issues remain or performance becomes chronically unsatisfactory. There is no "progressive EAP referral process," but in practice it may look like there is. The one pitfall of this progression is the protracted period of time over which a personal problem may grow worse. This can interfere with the employee's decision to get help, because of denial. Supervisors should focus on helping employees make changes early and in an expedient manner, to prevent an increasing likelihood that the employee will become unsalvageable.

Personality Clash

Q. I have two employees with a personality clash. Periodically I succeed in getting them to cooperate, but it doesn't "stick." Soon they are back at each other's throats. What is the preferred method for referring them to the EAP?

A. There is no preferred method for referring employees in conflict to the EAP, but most EA professionals can recommend an approach based on their past success at conflict resolution. Consult with the EAP to offer background information and plan the referral. Be careful not to see conflict as "the problem." This view of conflict can unwittingly allow you to tolerate it for years, because the root causes of conflict are ignored. Conflicts between employees are usually symptoms of other issues requiring intervention or personal change. If you decide to refer employees individually, you may discover that their venting in private with the EAP produces an almost immediate cessation of tension. Be assured that it is temporary. When each employee is feeling supported and aligned with the EAP, however, the next step of engagement can proceed. Usually, EAPs quickly obtain clarity about the general path toward resolution with the above approach.

Becoming More Assertive

Q. How can I become more assertive with the help of the EAP? I avoid certain employees I don't like to supervise. These are difficult personalities, and I know I need to change this coping style, because I can feel that it's creating unspoken tension.

A. To start being assertive, understand the value in practicing it. Without assertiveness you participate in laissez-faire management, which means you are supporting a policy or attitude of letting things take their own course without interference. This usually has only one result—things spiral out of control. Most supervisors are not completely unassertive. Instead, assertiveness is selective. Reinforcement of undesirable employee behaviors, however, happens by default without assertiveness. The good news is that assertiveness is easier to learn than most people think, because there are mechanics, word phrases, and sentence structures that can be tested and their results experienced. Find assertive language you can practice, watch the result, make a tweak, and try again. Eventually, you will see results. EAPs are pros at helping employees, including supervisors, be assertive. The EA professional will help you get started, process the outcomes of your attempts, and guide forward progress.

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