

Frontline Supervisor



■ **I consider myself very assertive, and I think it has helped me get ahead. However, in a recent off-site workshop, I learned that my colleagues feel I am too assertive. I was surprised, but is there a balance?**

Assertiveness is like salt in a sauce, according to researcher Daniel Ames, PhD of Columbia Business School. “Nobody notices a problem with assertiveness unless there is too much or too little.” Aspiring leaders who are low on assertiveness cannot stand up for their interests and they suffer by being ineffective at achieving goals and delivering results. On the other hand, people with too much assertiveness may get their way, but only by threatening the relationships around them. Over time, the social costs undermine their efforts. Effective leaders push hard enough to get their way, but not so hard they can’t get along. Awareness is your best weapon in the pursuit of control over assertiveness. Being able to ratchet it up and down as necessary is a valuable skill. For more help with this, talk to the EAO.

■ **EAPs see self-referred employees for any type of personal problem. If the problem is primarily about the supervisor, however, will the EAO urge the employee to sign a release so the other side of the story can be obtained from the supervisor?**

EAPs work with the information provided by employees to guide them toward a workable solution. Complaints about supervisors are common, and EAPs are able to keep the organizational perspective in mind as they help the employee. If additional information is needed, the employee can supply it or the EAO can request it. You may feel uncomfortable imagining your employees at the EAO talking about you, but EAPs seek healthful and productive resolutions that benefit employees in their roles as workers without dismissing or undermining your role or position.

■ **I have an employee who is a very nervous person. He worries about making a mistake around me, and his hands tremble. I am reassuring, but it’s not**

Your employee’s nervousness affects communication, interferes with the relationship between you, increases his risk of making mistakes or getting injured on the job, and may ultimately cause him to quit. His issues are interfering with his job satisfaction, which is also important. These documentable issues justify a referral. Your employee may respond to an encouraged self-referral, but why wait? There is nothing

helping. Should I make a referral to the EAO or encourage a self-referral? Is this an anxiety disorder?

improper about making a referral now that will allow you to communicate with the EAO and help him. The employee's problem is likely some condition related to anxiety, but many things could conceivably cause the behavior you are seeing.

■ Do employees self-refer to the EAO for help with alcoholism, or is this the type of personal problem that will ultimately require a formal referral because of denial?

Self-referrals do occur, but they typically result from drinking-related incidents, not simply the awareness of alcoholism. Like other illnesses with behavioral aspects to them, enabling and denial act as forces making self-diagnosis difficult. A DUI, the fear of divorce, or a "close call," among other situations, may motivate self-referrals. Alcoholics are seeking help for their "drinking problem" hoping to regain control over their drinking. They often have ruled out the possibility of alcoholism based on their own unique definition, which excludes them. This is where expertise is crucial in the assessment process. The EA professional may have only one shot at helping these employees understand the nature of what they are dealing with and motivating them to take the next step. The client must be sold on the benefits—the promises of recovery—that result from proper treatment. Some clients are ready for this message, while others are not. The window of motivation is short. The good news is that the predictability of future crises almost guarantees them another chance to hear the message and accept help.

■ I think supervisors who share information about their lives, personal foibles, and the real problems they face at home and at work are less mysterious. Does this help elicit more cooperation from troubled workers and motivate them to feel closer and perform better?

Demonstrating vulnerability will tend to improve relationships in your personal life, but it can undermine your supervisory role in correcting worker performance. The employment setting operates with a different set of dynamics than your personal life. Because a paycheck passes downward in an organization to employees and a hierarchy exists to ensure productivity and workflow, there are natural differences in status that exist between workers and those who supervise them. With their higher status, supervisors possess influence and leverage that allow them the power to correct problems, guide employees, judge performance, and discipline and reward workers. But these forces can be undermined. One way to do that is to convince employees that you and they are equal in status. Self-disclosure (being too close and personal) produces this result. If you are perceived as a friend rather than a boss, your employees may lose the sense of urgency needed to work under your direction. The same dynamic occurs when parents forgo discipline to become friends with their children. To find a middle ground with your employees, be open about your personal life within limits in order to maintain a professional workplace. For additional support, consult with the EAO.