

Frontline Supervisor



■ **Regarding supervisor behavior, what does the phrase “silo mentality” mean? Can the EAO play a role in helping supervisors overcome this practice?**

The phrase “silo mentality” is applicable to the dysfunctional practice of colleges or departments within universities isolating themselves. Withholding information, competitiveness, and communication breakdowns can result in isolated work environments. Supervisors can unwittingly practice a similar behavior by isolating themselves, withholding information, failing to engage with workers, and focusing more on charts and metrics than developing their people. Avoiding this practice requires skills of engagement, collaboration, sharing information, coaching, and modeling. New supervisors are especially at risk for isolation behavior if they give in to their insecurities. Some may deny their role and hope the work unit can function without their direction by deferring to one or two strong subordinates. It may feel safer, but it is a recipe for disaster. The employee assistance office is an ideal source of help. Beyond coaching, the EAO can confidentially assess personal issues and help the supervisor identify and overcome roadblocks to full engagement.

■ **I have always understood humor in the workplace to be a good thing. Recently I heard that this is not necessarily true. Can you explain this with respect to supervisors who do a lot of kidding around?**

There is a difference between employees expressing humor within a psychologically safe workplace and the supervisor over-employing humor as a way to interact and manage employees. This can heighten employee vulnerability, while at the same time making supervisors less approachable. Ironically, some humor may contribute to an intimidating and offensive work environment. Overused, humor can also send a message that there is nothing very serious about what we do here—that mistakes and problems are not to be taken seriously. This dynamic can prompt employees to focus on personal matters rather than workplace productivity; indeed, research has shown this to be the case. However, humor is a natural human behavior. It is not something that has to be deliberately learned or practiced. Naturally occurring, it can be an indicator of a positive work climate where employees are able to be happy, healthy, and productive. Learn more at <https://olinblog.wustl.edu/2018/04/funny-side-hard-edge-bosss-behavior-matters/>.

■ **I have been offered a manager position in my department, but I don't know if I have the leadership skills to do it. I don't mind a challenge, but isn't leadership a natural aptitude sort of thing? Can the EAO help with my decision?**

It is a myth that leadership cannot be learned. Here are a few rewarding challenges to master—all teachable: thinking and acting in ways that encourage others so they trust and follow you; creating a vision or a direction in which you want to lead a team; having a personal vision for yourself within this context; considering crises that can happen and how to respond to them; being optimistic (optimistic authority figures inspire others); resolving conflicts; taking charge before being told what to do; pulling others into the action; striving for excellence, not perfection; maintaining high standards and giving others credit where it is due; praising employees frequently to inspire them to produce; taking risks out of your comfort zone; being truthful with yourself; knowing your strengths and weaknesses, and depending on others with skills you lack to achieve work-unit goals; building your brand as a leading expert in one or two areas; being a credible resource others trust; being a role-model for compassion, commitment, effort, integrity, teamwork, good communication, and vision; and getting to work on time. Feeling insecure about any of these? Talk to the EAO and troubleshoot hurdles throughout your career.

■ **I suspect one of my employees is experiencing spousal abuse at home. I have seen bruises and this person often comes to work upset. Is this any of my business as a supervisor? How can I help without feeling I am butting into the employee's personal life?**

Your employee is demonstrating the signs of domestic abuse. From your description, and experience with him/her, you have a strong rationale for inquiring whether help is needed and telling your employee why you are concerned. This is not intruding, playing the role of amateur diagnostician, or acting inappropriately. Responsible authorities on the subject of domestic violence encourage involvement by others and admonish those who remain silent in the face of obvious symptoms of abuse. Be assertive in sharing available resources for this person to get help. In Dane County, our local resource is DAIS (<https://abuseintervention.org/>). Share your concern and observations of repetitive disruption to the work situation. While we know it is the victim's choice to get help, it is appropriate to make a referral to the EAO based upon the effect on the work environment and, who knows, you may save a life doing so.

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