

Q. I don't want to ignore my gut if I think an employee is struggling with a serious personal problem. I know I can't probe, diagnose, or disregard boundaries, but what compromise can be made so I don't ignore signals of what might be a significant unaddressed need?

A. Supervisors may naturally come to know their employees quite well as they discover their work goals, ambitions, personality styles, and whatever personal information they choose to share about their lives. It follows that the same supervisors will notice when things are not quite right. It is then appropriate to ask—and supervisors should ask—how employees are doing. These meaningful conversations with supervisors may lead to employees getting help for personal problems. Seeing an employee at their desk all day, not interacting with others, should concern you if it is uncharacteristic. Showing concern could lead to the discovery of a serious matter and referral to the EAO.

Q. I think most organizations suffer with gossip and backbiting in the workplace, and few are completely successful at eliminating this problem. I am certain it erodes morale. What can supervisors do to effect change in this area?

A. Organizational psychologist Glenn D. Rolfsen, Ph.D., discovered through working with over 200 organizations that gossip and backbiting are indeed stubborn problems. He documented that eliminating these problems will increase productivity, reduce absenteeism, and improve morale. The tactic he discovered, after failing in other attempts, was to change behavior associated with gossip, which helped employees acquire new habits of personal awareness to change the behavior. Beyond being personally aware, he calls this “new consciousness.” He did three things that produced the result he wanted. One was to educate employees about gossip's toxic effects, and second was to get everyone to sign a commitment to eliminating it. Third, and perhaps the most important, he discovered a way to keep that goal in front of everyone effectively to achieve “top of mind awareness.” It worked. See his TEDx presentation on this achievement and consider what may fit with your situation. Ask the EAO to team with you on projects to improve morale and develop a positive workplace. Source: YouTube.com, Glenn D. Rolfsen, TEDxOslo, <https://youtu.be/eYLb7WUtYt8>

Q. We had an employee experience a major heart attack. It was dramatic and frightening, but the hard part for me was the next day. As the boss, I was unsure what action to take other than responding like everyone else to the shock and processing it. What should a manager do?

A. When tragedies like the one you describe strike the workplace, the immediate response is usually obvious—engaging first responders and immediate needs. Days later, supervisors wonder, “What's my role in helping everyone? What do I say? How do I act?” You will make a huge impact on employees with the simplest things: being more available, being empathetic, engaging the EAO to provide onsite crisis response services, modeling your own need to process and share feelings, being a good communicator, making it easier for others to spend time discussing or processing their reactions, finding ways to lighten the load, and being flexible with work demands. You will be surprised how employees will thank you later. You may think to yourself, “Wow, I didn't do much.” But in fact, you really did all that was needed. Supervisors represent the organization, and tragic events are always remembered in terms of how “the organization responded.” That's you.

Q. I've read that the biggest complaint employees have about supervisors is lack of communication, specifically that supervisors are inconsistent with rules or don't praise workers enough. So, let's hear what most bosses are doing right, or at least what is complained about the

least.

A. In one study of over 2,000 employees surveyed, one fifth of employees agreed the worst characteristic of the boss is failure to communicate clearly what they want. Second spot went to inconsistency, one minute demanding tasks to be done one way and then insisting they be done differently the next. Other frustrations include delegating too much work, taking credit for the success of others, and being unable to take a joke—despite happily dishing banter out. Being a good supervisor starts with a review of your leadership style with an eye toward finding areas that need improvement. Asking your employees for feedback will allow you to gain insight to develop the skills all supervisors need to be effective managers. Attributes of a good supervisor include; interactive communication skills, empathy and compassion, ability to delegate, flexibility when possible, a display of confidence, a positive attitude, a dose of humility and passion for the organization.

For more information on assessing and strengthening your management skills, contact the EAO

Additional Resources

UW Campus Resources: [Learning and Talent Development](#), [Campus Supervisors Network](#)

Two articles: [The Skills Leaders Need at Every Level](#), Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman, Harvard Business Review

[What Makes a Great Boss](#), Melanie Joy Douglas, Monster Contributing Writer

[What Makes a Great Boss](#), Melanie Joy Douglas, Monster Contributing Writer

Q. This year I am determined to improve the level of respect employees show each other in our organization beyond policies and work rules, what is a key strategy to positively influence change?

A. Maintaining a respectful workplace is a growing concern for organizations, but what many people do not realize is that much disrespect is not premeditated. Instead, it is reflective of a lack of self-control, education, fear and the influence of personal biases. Supporting a work culture where employees actively discourage disrespectful behavior toward each other by pointing it out as it happens is a powerful change strategy. Beyond formal training, actively encourage and support a respectful workplace where employees can point it out. Make it a tradition because a respectful workplace is everyone's responsibility. This approach will raise the level of awareness for preventing disrespectful behavior.