

Frontline Supervisor
May 2019

Q. I have an employee with behavioral issues. I have not addressed the issue with the employee, or made a referral to the EAO because I fear the employee might quit if I do. This employee can go anywhere, and I can't afford to lose them. Coworkers sometimes complain about the employee's behavior and attitude, but I can see they have also adapted. Should I still take some action?

A consult with the EAO could be helpful in further exploring this issue. Left unchanged, you risk an eventual crisis or disruptive event from this situation growing worse. Effects on coworkers and yourself could occur. This troubled employee may have lost the trust of their peers, which can adversely affect workplace communication. Reduced cooperation negatively affects innovation, outcomes, and productivity. Teams also make sub-optimum decisions when they are not working well together. Your performance may also be affected because your leadership may be devalued by your subordinates for your failure to act. Trust in your abilities could erode and your reputation might suffer with upper management. The EAO can help you look at ways to communicate and explore how to refer your employee.

Q. I sense a subtle resentment toward me by my employees regarding my role and I've heard statements that suggest I do not do enough work. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am not very visible, but I am surprised at how unaware some of my employees appear to be.

Many supervisors are the subject of behind-the-scenes conversations by employees who may have little awareness of their activities. Employees may assume that their supervisors do very little. Usually the opposite is true. Management expert and author Robert J. Graham once remarked, "If they know nothing of what you are doing, they suspect that you are doing nothing." This observation points to your solution. Avoid the temptation to be just an overseer or absent and mysterious person to your employees. More important, spend some time with them. Even if giving them more information about your activities is not advisable, this relationship-building will reduce the degree to which you are viewed as kicking back while they do the heavy lifting. What drives employee suspicion that their supervisor makes little contribution is usually a lack of communication. Consider scheduling a Management Consultation with the EAO to further explore this issue.

Q. We have an employee who is on the autism spectrum. They are a great worker and we have accommodated some of their needs, like ensuring that the office has less noise and no fluorescent light. Is the EAO able to address the needs of this person?

Your EAO consultants are able to work with any employee referred to them and will seek ways to communicate and engage so an employee's needs are met. The EA consultants do not claim to have specialized knowledge about every problem brought to them. However, using the EAO as a starting point offers tremendous advantages no matter what the problem might be. These include: 1) a free and confidential interview by a

professionally trained listener who is committed to impartiality while doing a problem assessment or resource referral; 2) an experienced person with expert knowledge about community and counseling resources; 3) a professional who is willing to expend the effort, no matter how rigorous, in locating the proper referral source; and 4) follow-up to ensure the proper help was received and the employee is successfully engaging with that help.

Q. Is it helpful for supervisors to discuss their personal problems with subordinates as a way of appearing more “human” and building rapport? The idea seems sound because showing oneself to be vulnerable allows employees to feel more at ease, right?

Management and supervisory skill development authors have debated the merits of supervisors sharing personal information with subordinates, and in particular, information related to personal problems or shortcomings. Employees may feel more at ease with such supervisors, but research does not show this translates to increased productivity. In fact, participating in this type of relationship can undermine the employment dynamic with regard to the manager to whom one is accountable. When supervisors have personal problems, the best source of support and focused help is, of course, the EAO. Build rapport with employees by identifying needs, developing their talents, and helping them find meaning in their jobs.

[*When sharing hurts: how and why self-disclosing weakness undermines the task oriented relationships of higher status disclosers.*](#) Kerry Roberts Gibson, Dana Harari, Jennifer Carson Marr, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, January 2018.

Q. I am a new supervisor. I have never had training, and I can tell that this new position will involve learning everything the hard way. I bought a few books and I found some courses online, but what will be the most likely mistakes I will make? If I know what they are, perhaps I will make fewer.

Most managers learn by doing and by the mistakes they make. But there are important things to remember: 1) Keep employees informed, let them know what the intentions are for the work unit, and do what you say you are going to do; 2) Keep information flowing, effective workplace communication is the number one complaint of employees and managers alike; 3) Put time into knowing and engaging with your employees; 4) Use your expertise to solve group problems, not to show how much you know. Develop your employees as the experts; 5) Do not seek acceptance by becoming friends with employees but by having effective workplace relationships; 6) Learn the art of feedback and timely praise and how to make it meaningful, and create change with it; and 7) Consult with mentors on any of the above, and use the EAO when the going gets tough.