

August 2019

FrontLine Supervisor EAO Newsletter

Q. Poor job performance or unsatisfactory quality of work is the number one issue with troubled employees. Beyond this, what is the most common problem among troubled employees, and how should supervisors respond?

A. The management research firm Center for Creative Leadership surveyed over 200 supervisors and discovered that the most common employee problem (other than poor job performance) is difficulty getting along with others. Conflict and friction between two employees is not uncommon, but beware of employees who:

- Blame others for their problems
- Make others feel guilty for not living up to their expectations
- Show an inability to own “their half” of problems
- Have little insight into their behavior
- View discussions about their behavior as personal attacks
- Are overly adept at making excuses

These behaviors in combination may warrant a conversation with you, followed by an early referral to EAO. Remember, EAO prefers a heads up before a referral so we can be most effective in providing services.

Q. Can I refer an employee to the EAO to help them deal with boredom? One of our best workers expressed loss of interest in the work and labeled it boredom. I know this is not a psychological problem, but can the EAO help address it?

A. Work with your employee to examine how the job can be structured in a way that rekindles interest. If you don't see an immediate rally, suggest help from the EAO. The problem of boredom is a good example of how something that appears minor could be a symptom of a more serious problem. Your employee's boredom could be linked to depression. Depression costs business and industry about \$44 billion a year, according to the American Psychiatric Association. Other symptoms of depression may be visible to others in the workplace. They include withdrawing from the team, isolating oneself, being indifferent, putting things off, missing deadlines, seeming absent-minded, procrastinating, being late to work, and more. All are quantifiable performance measures. Your employee may not go to the EAO, so be prepared down the road to consider another referral as needed.

Q. How can I direct an employee to stop complaining about problems to coworkers and instead bring these complaints directly to me? I think this behavior damages morale.

A. If complaining adversely affects the work climate and productivity, then it is reasonable to ask your employee to come to you instead of complaining to others. You will discover in your career that there are employees who like to “stir the pot,” or, more accurately, they enjoy having others listen to their analysis and diagnosis of the work unit’s problems and the organization’s or supervisor’s competence. Much complaining is motivated simply by a desire to engage and socialize with coworkers. These complaints tend to act as icebreakers in conversations. It is easier to discuss a complaint or issue or open with a common concern than it is to offer an observation about the nice weather. This becomes a habit of communication among employees. If needed, encourage the employee to visit the EAO, where they will find listening ears, and you can count on the discussion being one that helps the employee and supports the organization.

Q. I see a lot of articles in recent years about mental wellness in the workplace. What is the business case for so much attention to this subject? What can one supervisor do?

A. Employers pay high costs for mental illness problems at work. On the low side, it’s about \$70 billion a year. Absenteeism, reduced productivity, and increased health care are the three big cost areas. If employers can influence mental wellness in ways that reduce these exposures, they can improve productivity and have a healthier bottom line. So mental wellness is not about intrusiveness in employees’ lives but about creating work environments that have a positive impact on wellness. As a supervisor, you have significant influence on promoting mental wellness. Here are some examples:

1. Don’t praise the employee who comes in early and stays late. This practice eventually erodes productivity and leads to burnout.
2. Encourage employees to eat lunch away from their desks and take regular vacations to recharge and refresh.
3. Don’t expect employees to answer the phone, email, or engage in work around the clock.
4. Be a model for these behaviors yourself.

Q. I often refer employees to EAO and LifeMatters, yet have never used the services myself. I am not sure I understand the difference between the two programs, and which one might be the best option. My partner and I would like to talk to someone about parenting a child with special needs. What would you advise?

A. Both EAO and LifeMatters staff are master's level professionals. EAO Staff are in a private location in Lowell Hall on the Madison campus, convenient for employees in the area. To schedule an appointment for up to five sessions with a counselor in this office, call 263-2987 or email eao@mailplus.wisc.edu. If you and your partner prefer to meet with someone off campus, call LifeMatters at 800-634-6433. They will gather brief information in order to connect you with a counselor in the statewide network who can address your parenting concerns. You will receive the name(s) and contact information for a counselor within 3-5 days. Your EA professional, whether at EAO or LifeMatters, will provide support, consultation and additional resources if needed.