

## Front Line Supervisor Newsletter, Issue 3



### Frequently Asked Questions

**Call Health Promotion Northwest EAP for more support at 360-788-6565.**

**Q:** *How can I resolve my fear of bringing my concerns to my supervisor? He frequently responds in a demeaning manner when I bring problems to him or ask for his advice. Sometimes, he does so in front of my peers.*

**A:** You should carefully plan your approach to discussing your concerns with your supervisor. Managers with the style of communication you describe are frequently unaware of the disturbing effect their behavior has on others. Try this approach: (1) make a private appointment with your supervisor to discuss your concerns; (2) discuss with him the most recent occurrence of his disturbing behavior, recalling what you said and how he responded; (3) explain how his reaction made you feel and how it affects your motivation, concentration, ability to perform, and self-confidence; (4) acknowledge your supervisor's experience and your desire for his help in solving problems, so as to minimize the likelihood of a defensive reaction; and (5) ask him for guidance on a new issue, giving him the opportunity to practice giving a helpful response. Consider contacting the EAP to examine other approaches to this problem.

**Q:** *I have an employee who is a super performer, but he is not a good team player. He is argumentative and uncooperative. Is it appropriate to refer him to the EAP for his problem being a team player?*

**A:** If being a team player is an essential job function, your employee's resistance to teamwork is a serious performance issue. If you are unable to influence him to change, an EAP referral would be appropriate. It can be tempting to minimize the importance of

interpersonal skills with employees who are technical experts or high achievers, but tolerating poor behavior reinforces it. Once established, patterns can be difficult to change. An acute display of such behavior sometimes motivates management to pursue discipline or an EAP referral. In the extreme, uncooperative employees may become bullies or territorial, or willing to challenge not only coworkers, but management itself. Sometimes these employees will threaten to quit, hoping this makes others back off. Realizing that there are long-term negative effects of ignoring this problem can help you act.

**Q:** *I am trying to help my employee improve her performance. Unfortunately, she takes my feedback and constructive criticism as proof that I am trying to get rid of her. How can I help her see this isn't true?*

**A:** Lack of communication may be preventing your employee from understanding three things: (1) your belief that her work is valuable; (2) your desire to retain her as an employee; and (3) your supervision style. Clearly discuss the first two issues and increase your daily contact with your employee. This may increase her sense of trust. Some employees are more fearful than others of supervision. Their fear causes them to ascribe unsubstantiated motives to constructive criticism from well-meaning supervisors. In such instances, constructive criticism may not be taken at face value. Increasing communication with those you supervise and looking for opportunities to praise good work are your two most powerful management tools. An EAP referral could also be appropriate if her response does not change.

**Q:** *We have an employee with a severe absenteeism problem who is very close to losing her job. Although we have made it clear her job is on the line, she appears to have no fear. What would make an employee simply not care?*

**A:** Although fear of job loss is generally a powerful force for all who draw a paycheck, your employee could have a personal problem so severe that her ability to choose consistent attendance is not fully in her control. Depression or addiction problems are classic examples of such problems, but there are others. More unusual reasons for loss of motivation include receiving significant financial support from another source such as parents or family members, or perhaps another job that brings in more money. An employee who intends to quit, especially with an annuity, may feel little urgency to improve her attendance at work. Perhaps she has a personal health problem, too. Attendance problems of employees can be baffling. It is important to remember not to

diagnose reasons for attendance problems, but rather to refer employees as early as possible to the EAP.

**Q:** *Some supervisors say the best way to improve performance is to praise employees for good work. Others say pointing out poor performance and making standards clear are more important. Which is correct?*

**A:** A little of both is best. Although important, it is seldom good enough simply to praise employees for good performance in an attempt to reinforce it. Employees with undesirable behaviors or performance must be told what is not desired and what is expected. Although reinforcing positive behaviors instead of pointing out negative behaviors is a sound principle, much more is required in the world of work. Supervisors who resist pointing out performance problems in favor of praising good performance set themselves up for bigger problems later if problems become so severe that termination actions are required. Employees who are terminated are often stunned because they have been given the false impression their performance is satisfactory or better, and in such cases, the likelihood they will contest termination increases. This is particularly true of long-term employees whose behavior problems were ignored by many prior supervisors.