

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

January 2008

Frontline Supervisor



■ **I have discovered since being a supervisor that it's sometimes difficult to meet my employees' and my employer's needs equally. I try to draw a balance, but it is clearly not always possible. How do I straddle the fence of loyalty between these two groups better?**

Being a good supervisor should not be an issue of straddling the fence between competing groups. Every great supervisor knows that the first responsibility is to develop a productive relationship with employees so they can get the work done. A productive relationship means fairness, clear and good communication, recognition, and reward for productivity. This is how the needs of the employer are best met. The workplace must not be a "them versus us" game. Some supervisors do not understand this point. Because their employees are directly in front of them all the time, and their need to please is great, it's easy to hear employee complaints, be sympathetic, and feel as though they are the "main thing." Some managers may view themselves as "champions for the people." This is a role fraught with stress. There is nothing wrong with looking out for your employees, but if the needs of the organization are pushed to second place in the process, you will not serve either.

■ **One of my employees came to me and I promised her confidentiality in exchange for her telling me about her troubles at home. I should have referred her to the EAP, but now I feel I have information about her life at home that I should not keep confidential. What should I do?**

Talk to the EAP about your difficult situation. Depending on the type of information that has been shared, the EAP will advise you on what to do. Some things learned in discourse with others should not be kept secret. For example, you should not promise to keep secret information you have about an intended suicide or a child being abused. There are other examples as well. You are not a professional counselor, so you're stuck with the problem of making a judgment call. Privileged information, and information governed by privacy laws or confidentiality laws that prohibit or require disclosure, are linked to who we are and what we do. Your experience demonstrates the importance of remaining in the role of supervisor versus counselor. The EAP is better equipped, with its experience and skills, and the confidentiality laws that govern it, to manage confidential information, just as you are better equipped to correct performance.

■ **I am not an organized person. I forget things, lose things, and keep a sloppy desk. I am good at what I do, however,**

It sounds like you are a creative spirit but could use some skills and coaching in how to organize yourself and delegate properly. After hiring an assistant, you are at risk for leaping between the extremes of refusing to delegate tasks to delegating wildly, sloppily, and hastily. Plan now to talk to the EAP. The employee you hire will be the most important person in

and I have climbed the organization's ladder rapidly. Now I need to hire an assistant. How do I hire someone whom I won't drive crazy?

your business life. Assuming you don't make dramatic changes, he or she will have to be very good at running behind, scooping up the pieces, and making sure initiatives get implemented. This key person has to cheerfully accept all this responsibility and, often, may have to practically read your mind. This is okay if the employee you hire loves this role. Some do. Others love it but become controlling and manipulative because the supervisor has ceded too much authority without accountability. Making some key changes now will set the stage for a gratifying relationship with your new hire.

■ I have hired many employees, and most are enthusiastic go-getters in the beginning, but after several months their energy diminishes and they become just so-so in their productivity. What causes this, and should I refer them to the EAP when I see this happen?

When someone is fresh and new on the job, energy abounds. It's like starting a new weight-loss program—nothing could be more exciting. But then things change. To understand diminishing enthusiasm after hiring, look at what is happening between the employee and management at the time of hire. In the beginning, especially the first couple of months, new employees are treated like celebrities. They may receive higher compensation than they had at their previous job. They are made to feel excited about the future, with anticipated achievements. And they experience camaraderie. Along with just compensation, achievement and camaraderie have been identified in many studies as essential to maintaining employee enthusiasm. It appears that in the beginning, much of what drives enthusiasm is naturally in place. Learn how to keep this motivating atmosphere thriving and you will impact enthusiasm favorably. If your attempts to fire up enthusiasm are not successful and productivity standards are not satisfactory, an EAP referral is a good idea.

■ One of my employees has returned to work following a heart attack. Is there anything I can do to help him not have another one? This is a pretty high-stress environment. Should I talk him into reducing his hours?

Your employee should let you know if he needs any help from the organization to support his recovery, but you can also ask how best to support him. Almost all jobs include stress. Beyond stress, is something called "job strain." Job strain is high psychological demand from work pressure combined with little ability to control it. (Feeling trapped like a rat is a good way to describe it.) Some research as shown job strain as a factor in the recurrence of heart attacks. In Japan, the word "karoshi" means "death from work." It is a widely studied social concern. To reduce job strain on employees, try reducing psychological pressure of work demands. If possible, increase the employee's control and decision making over those work demands. What about the long hours? In some studies, long work hours alone were not associated with recurrent cardiovascular events, only job strain. (Journal of Occupational Health, No. 45, 2005.)

NOTES