

Frontline Supervisor



■ **I have an employee who is a superstar performer, but acts like a bully toward a coworker. This coworker has not complained and does not appear upset by the behavior. They seem to get along quite well. Should I leave this situation alone and not be concerned? Can the EAP help?**

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

■ **I meet with many employees and frequently correct performance. Unfortunately, I often find myself forgetting the content of many discussions so I can't be definite about what was**

Even though the bullying has not been reported, if you've observed it you should address it. Not all victims are reduced to visible anguish by bullies. Instead, they try to cope and suffer in silence. These employees can pay a big price in lost productivity and negative effects on their health. Ignoring your good judgment that a problem exists will jeopardize everyone concerned. Like sexual harassment, bullying is not always reported by victims despite their victimization, but if you know about it, you must address the problem immediately. Intervene and rely upon the reasonable standards of behavior and respect needed in the workplace as the basis for taking action. Act in accordance with your policies. Refer the bullying employee to the EAP. Afterward, talk with the victim about standards of conduct, and offer the EAP as a possible source of support.

Many supervisors are the subject of behind-the-scenes conversations by employees who have little awareness of their activities. As a result, employees may assume that their supervisors do very little. Of course, 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 activity 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.

You have heard the expression "If it isn't in writing, it doesn't exist." This is a good philosophy for supervisors to follow and relates to the crucial art of taking contemporaneous notes. No matter how good your memory or ability to recall past events, even in exquisite detail, it's no match for the power of contemporaneous notes. Contemporaneous notes frequently win in contests where one person's word is pitted against another's. They can serve to prove you right, despite their subjectivity at the time originally written, as to what actually happened or who said

said, negotiated, or agreed to. How can I improve my memory?

what. Develop the habit of routinely keeping notes on disputes, negotiations, corrective actions, and performance matters regarding your employees. Although the importance of documentation is often discussed in supervisory skills courses, the routine use of contemporaneous notes is a related skill that supervisors must also come to appreciate.

■ I don't hesitate to immediately go to employees and discuss performance issues when I see them. I often experience a lot of resistance and anger, however. I think my approach needs improvement. What are some good tips on how to approach these discussions?

Sometimes the correction of performance must be done quickly. It's important to expect employees to accept the correction and move on with their work. There are many techniques for giving feedback however; it's almost an art. Doing it well can increase productivity, which is your goal. Assume that employees want feedback; many studies show that employees don't think they get enough. Supervisors who are feedback pros operate on the premise that most employees hired for their positions are fully capable of doing acceptable work, so feedback and correcting of performance become a partnership in communication, not a one-way attack. This mind-set includes investigating what employees think about their own performance, what guidance they are relying upon for what they are supposed to do, what changes you want, and your ability to explain specifically what you want the employee to do or produce.

■ Most of the employees that I supervise are sales personnel and customer service representatives. EAPs aren't sales experts, so when it comes to improving the skills of my staff when they have problems with customers, can the EAP still be a valuable resource for me or them?

Although EAPs are not trained specifically in the fields of sales and customer service, they may still be able to help. This help includes imparting "soft skills" that affect your bottom line. Do you have employees who habitually struggle with keeping their cool to avoid arguing with customers? Do some employees not grasp how important it is to be successful with customers rather than right? Would you like to see your employees demonstrate more empathy toward customers by using active listening skills? This is the ability to show by one's behavior that a customer's needs or complaints are heard and understood. The ability to adapt to personality styles of customers and communicate effectively in sales presentations is another area to explore. Consider performance issues and talk to the EAP about the possibilities. Everyone may benefit, including the bottom line.

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