



# The Frontline Supervisor

February 2020

Q. I am a new manager. I want to be a leader who can influence change within the work culture (or at least within my department) so people become more respectful and positive toward each other. Where do I begin?

A. A positive workplace has roots in an institutional mindset that flows from the top down. So start by focusing on yourself and develop a keen self-awareness for how you engage with employees. Spend a week or so understanding what individual employees are trying to achieve and what they think about the work unit. In these interactions, are you being authentic and vulnerable, which means "being yourself" rather than cool and distant? Your communication style is one key piece in helping produce the work environment you desire (or undermining it) because it is amplified by your role. It is also modeled. Some people mistakenly believe a positive workplace is a matter of good luck. They point to it being the result of the type of work, a sunny office, or a few strong and cheery personalities who are role models for others to follow. Consult with the EAP to help you develop the communication style and engagement skills you need in order to reach your goal of creating an energized office that matches your vision.

Q. What are the missteps of supportive supervisors who, although they really believe in the EAP, unwittingly send a message to employees in an organization that the EAP is not a safe source of help?

An EAP is designed to attract employees with its greatest asset being confidentiality. Employee-clients should have no doubts about it. Supervisor conduct that misaligns with these critical features can undermine the program. For example, an EAP is not a disciplinary program, but can be viewed as such if a supervisor's referral of an employee is perceived attitudinally as a punitive step in correcting performance. Supervisors who discuss the referral of an employee with others who have no need to know about it can damage the fragile nature of an EAP's perception of its being a safe place that maintains confidentiality. Another misstep includes making an improper and indelible record in some manner of an employee's participation that others in the organization will discover. The bottom line is this: Employees will always have a collective opinion about the nature of EAP confidentiality. This word-of-mouth marketing is crucial, and supervisors must understand how vulnerable it is to being influenced for better or worse by what supervisors say and do.

Q. Will all employees with drug addictions, including alcoholism, eventually have job performance or attendance problems that come to the attention of management or supervisors at some point in the course of their careers?

A. Not all alcoholic and drug-addicted employees will come to management's attention because of performance problems during their careers. According to occupational alcoholism research, much of which was federally funded decades ago but is probably as accurate today as it was then, a significant percentage of addicts and alcoholics get into treatment by other means outside of the workplace, and will have no observable job performance problems of any kind prior to admission. This does not preclude that these same employees were not aware of declines in performance only known to themselves. Occupational alcoholism researchers have observed that hourly blue-collar workers with untreated alcoholism have more overt absenteeism, while white-collar workers experience more "on the job absenteeism." (The modern term is "presenteeism," meaning present at work but ill and not performing at peak.) This was once referred to as "half-man syndrome." Source Harrison M. Trice, "Absenteeism Among High-status and Low-status Problem Drinkers," IRL Research, Vol. IV, No. 1. Cornell Univ.

Q. Employees and supervisors can both experience burnout. But what symptoms of burnout are generally more experienced with supervisory personnel?

A. Supervisor burnout and employee burnout have similar causes but can include different symptoms because of individuals' respective roles. Do you experience a loss of enthusiasm in the role of leader for employees you supervise? Do you find your employees more annoying or unlikable than ever before? Do you resent or feel cynical toward employees who love their work? Do you find that you're growing angrier with upper management, administration, and your supervisor peers? Do your supervisor peers mention or joke that you are too cynical? Do you remain behind a closed office door more often, unable to be reached by employees? Answering yes to questions like these indicates the danger of experiencing burnout, and you need to take proactive steps to rebound before your condition worsens. The EAP can help.

Q. With all the talk about opioid abuse, I don't know anyone who has ever abused them. What workplaces are most likely to experience opioid abuse by their workers?

A. A study conducted by the Center for Drug Use and HIV/HCV Research at NYU College of Global Public Health found that construction workers are more likely than those of other professions to misuse prescription opioids. The findings rely on data gathered from 293,492 participants between 2005 to 2014. Overall, this is about 3.5 workers out of 100, which is a figure that translates into being 75% more likely than employees in other work disciplines, where 2 in 100 workers are statistically likely to abuse opioids. In Ohio and Massachusetts, recent studies show that construction workers were 6 to 7 times more likely than other workers to die from an opioid overdose. Construction workers are also twice as likely to use cocaine as other professions. Source: [www.cduhr.org/](http://www.cduhr.org/) [search: construction workers drugs]

**Questions? Call during business hours 815.748.8334, or after hours at 800.373.3327**