



The Frontline Supervisor

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Q. What is meant by the term equitable workplace? Is this an new abstract idea, or is it something that can be clearly defined with a business rationale? What is the supervisor's role in an equitable workplace?

A. An equitable workplace is a work culture or environment where everyone, regardless of their background (ethnic origin, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, physical abilities, or neurodiversity), believes they have an equal opportunity to be happy, healthy, and productive. The term evolved from diversity awareness and inclusion initiatives, but it is rapidly becoming the dominant way of describing a healthful workplace. The workplace has undergone dramatic changes in recent decades. Employees no longer feel as loyal to employers, but personal meaning and fulfillment in one's job have become paramount. As a result, employees are more aware of inequities, can spot them more quickly, and are less willing to tolerate working where they perceive disrespect or exclusion. This makes workplace equity a priority concern for companies and gives it a clear business rationale. There are hard economic costs of ignoring workplace equity. They appear in terms of lower productivity, absenteeism, and turnover. Managers can play significant roles in enhancing workplace equity by making changes in areas of communication, team development, opportunities, policies, and practices.

Q. I was sitting in EAP supervisor training discussing constructive confrontation and referral of troubled employees. I understand how to do it, but to be honest, I have always been afraid of confronting employees. So I don't. How can I overcome this fear?

A. Supervisors who do not confront employees sometimes struggle with other forms of communication as well, including giving positive feedback. Build your constructive confrontation skills with the "sandwiching technique," providing positive feedback and some corrective instruction, and then closing with a restatement of a positive observation about the employee's performance. Example: "Jane, good work on helping that customer find the right paint color yesterday. Give them the color list in the sales folder, and it will go faster for you. I was especially impressed with your patience!" Imagine your boss offering no feedback. How would it feel? This awareness may motivate you to do it more often. The EAP counselor can role-play a constructive confrontation with you to build your skills at confronting workers. Note that before confronting employees, have plenty of documentation. Not enough can prompt defensiveness and make it tougher. Consider an in-depth discussion with the EAP staff about anxiety when confronting employees. The counselor may have tips or referral suggestions to help you.

Q. I want to show maximum respect to my employees rather than overlook important ways to demonstrate that I value their expertise. I know this will build morale and enhance my relationship with them. So, what are the areas of interaction with them that I should consider?

A. The more you engage in respectful behaviors, the more your relationship deepens. Consider the following. 1) Respect and value your employee's time by acknowledging it when delegating assignments. 2) If you promise something to an employee, deliver on it. 3) If you set a meeting time, don't forget it. 4) Don't offer an assignment without explaining what's expected. 5) Use empathy to identify what employees need in order to be productive. 6) Reach out; don't wait for a request or complaint to come if you anticipate it. 7) Never act like an employee is replaceable. Ultimately, an employee might be easily replaced, but don't use this as a force in your relationship. 8) Treat employees as the experts, which means asking them for their ideas, opinions, and suggestions first. For example, if you need a new file cabinet and want an opinion on what kind, ask the administrative assistant first.

Q. I referred my employee to the EAP because of attitude problems. The referral went well, but later the employee shared untrue information with peers about our discussion that prompted the referral. I'd love to rebut what was said, but it would be improper. Do I have any options?

A. You can't share information with fellow workers, but you can meet with your employee to express your disappointment. One key concern about any sort of personal disclosure of EAP information is the reaction by fellow workers to whatever is disclosed and whether this causes any to question the degree of confidentiality offered by the program. If your employee has shared information related to your confrontation and it is untrue and disruptive to the workplace, it might be important to gauge whether this requires some sort of corrective response in your meeting with the employee. This situation you describe underscores the importance of ensuring your work unit or department is continually aware of the EAP, especially of its confidential nature. This message of confidentiality should have a continual presence within the organization so it overcomes any questions or concern about it.

Q. Our company treats all employees with respect, and we strive for an equitable workplace. Still, I don't see any research that says older workers and younger workers are equal in every respect with regard to strength, stress management, thought processes, etc.

A. There are no conclusive studies showing that older workers and younger workers differ in their ability to be productive as a measure of value. There are many research studies going back decades, however, that compare older and younger workers in almost every respect you can imagine. Some research shows older workers do not switch jobs as often. This saves money. And they are also more likely to show up on time and have fewer absences related to calling in sick. A recent study found that all workers benefit from being trusted, supported with adequate resources, and given flexible hours and respect. When these things are absent, however, older workers feel stress more. This reaction is not conclusively related to age alone but to life experience and workplace expectations.
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