



The Frontline Supervisor

March 2024

Q. How do I motivate an employee to give more to the work unit? He has been with us 17 years, and I think he has gotten used to a simple satisfactory level of performance. However, I think it is below his true potential. He'd probably put up a lot of resistance to change.

A. Motivating an employee to demonstrate more motivation and initiative can be a delicate task, but it is the primary role for any supervisor, so knowing what works and what's "state of the art" is essential. In other words, don't reinvent the wheel. Start with a candid conversation. Failing to help employees improve usually starts when you miss this step. Discuss performance and potential and rely on your observations and belief in his capabilities. Dive into this topic. Link these things to his aspirations and goals. He almost assuredly has some, or at least imagines a few despite his non-action; this is true for almost everyone, despite their non-action. Draw these out. State your expectations in a positive way and what you believe success for him looks like, but also point out opportunities for growth and advancement. Get agreement on a few changes and begin. Offer feedback frequently, recognize improvements, and offer training and new learning experiences to complement his development of new skills and knowledge.

Q. After a small truck accident, my employee admitted to smoking pot before I asked. He also shared a bunch of personal problems affecting him, so I made an EAP referral instead of testing him. I felt we were past the need for a test because of his honesty. Was this a mistake?

A. You should act on the requirements of the drug testing policy, which would necessarily include a referral to the EAP or other appropriate administrative action. Many safety and risk issues come with your decision, which include not knowing if other substances are involved, the inability to do follow-up testing, risk of public and associated legal jeopardy, and lack of leverage linked to job security that naturally creates greater urgency to remain in appropriate treatment if recommended by the EAP. The most common reasons supervisors ignore drug testing policies are to avoid straining the relationship with the employee, losing a worker and downtime, related scheduling problems, administrative/HR requirements, a fear that the supervisor will be perceived as hostile, and conflicts with labor representatives.

Q. I've been working in the restaurant industry for 35 years. It has a late-night "after-work drinks" culture, but after one employee's auto accident on the way home, I have decided not to attend these sessions. Should I encourage others to stop this practice, despite negative effects on morale?

A. It would be appropriate not to attend these after-work drinking sessions. Perhaps ironically, an after-work drinks culture can create social pressure to participate in drinking activities, potentially excluding individuals who choose not to drink or even those in recovery from alcohol addiction. As a result, these drinking occasions can contribute to feelings of isolation, alienation, or discomfort among employees and may negatively impact workplace morale and cohesion. Many courts have weighed in unfavorably on employers and held them liable for alcohol-related incidents or accidents that occur during or after work-related gatherings. Meet with your employees to see if there is another venue for after-work socializing with less risk to you and the organization. You'll find hundreds of ideas with a simple Google search. (Example: <https://www.inhersight.com/blog/insight-commentary/after-hours-networking-and-company-events-arent>)

Q. Is it appropriate for a supervisor to tell an employee "You must go to the EAP because of your job problems, issue, or circumstances"?

A. One of the core tenets of EAPs is that they are voluntary. You risk reducing the attractiveness of an EAP to the work population when this wording is used and then misinterpreted by the employee to mean that it is involuntary. Many employees under duress may describe their experience in unfavorable terms if they feel coerced to participate in the EAP. An EAP functions as a "program of attraction." To protect this dynamic, reduce risk, and safeguard its value, it is better to say "I [or we] are required to make a formal referral to the EAP because of the circumstances..." Your referral in this context is more likely to be viewed as voluntary or as an accommodation in the event a personal problem is affecting work performance or conduct. Doing so will not preclude any necessary action if the employee decides not to accept an offer of help. In the same regard, always view referral to the EAP as a positive and constructive opportunity, not a punishment, along with an attitude that reflects this fact.

Q. I've noticed over the years that employees who are more likeable as people tend to get more positive performance evaluations. I think many supervisors are not aware of their lack of objectivity in evaluating the performance of people they like. Why does this happen?

A. This is called the "halo effect." This is a bias where a positive impression of a person in one area (i.e., liked for being charismatic and jovial) leads to an overall positive perception of that person. In the workplace, an employee who fits the above description might get a higher performance evaluation than they deserve because the halo effect influences how the supervisor perceives and evaluates the employee. The risk of being unaware of this dynamic is that the supervisor will be accused of playing favorites, not giving enough feedback, or overlooking errors. Even worse, this can affect performance and pay raises that appear discriminatory. The solution is to use objective criteria for evaluations and, more importantly, to conduct them regularly because not doing so can lead to biases and potentially to risks of the halo effect.

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