



The Frontline Supervisor

April 2020

Q. Due to the coronavirus, we are asking every employee to work remotely if possible, but we don't have a remote work policy or anything like that yet. What basic issues of supervision should I consider to make sure employees are actually working as they should?

A. If you are new to the prospect of supervising remote workers, you will be inclined to ask first about how you can make sure the work is getting done. You will find lots of productivity tips and ideas online to help, but here's your first assignment: Learn and discover what makes remote employment more stressful than many people assume. For example, there is no live supervision—someone to turn to with a question. The simplest problem often cannot be solved because the one employee who knows the answer is unavailable. The double-edged sword of isolation and distractions is unceasing because relationships in the home and the needs of family members ultimately take priority, no matter what house rules have been established to help the remote worker function. How can the EAP help? Your awareness of these stressors can help support workers. Most will be honest, diligent, and hardworking. As you hear of or perceive distress about remote worker concerns, you can refer your employees to the EAP to discover solutions that work for them.

Q. I have seen alcoholic employees enter treatment quickly when their job performance problems were confronted, and others who avoided treatment for years while manipulating others until they were eventually fired. What explains this gap in motivation?

A. Who recovers and achieves sobriety and who does not, has been a focal point for discussing the insidious nature of alcoholism and addiction for decades. Even Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) has observed in its writings that some alcoholics seem constitutionally incapable of getting sober, although it also has observed that rarely does someone fail who truly follows its program. All of this alludes to the role of an individual's personality as a key component in avoiding treatment, but more important is the employee's past experience with being enabled. The more extensive this enabling history, the more difficult it can be to intervene. AA members use the witticism "too smart to get sober" to describe alcoholics who are intellectualizing, manipulative, and well-practiced at avoiding treatment.

Q. My employee was talking about leaving their spouse, who'd had an affair, and wanted to know what I thought about it. I am smart enough not to give my opinion, and only said, "I understand your dilemma. I can see why you feel angry." Was this response a bit too much on my part?

A. Offhand, it appears your response was reasonable and empathetic. Anyone listening to this story might respond the same way. However, because you are a supervisor, your brief discussion with the employee could be problematic. Because you are an authority figure, your employee places great weight on your utterances, no matter what they might be. If this employee decides to divorce, he or she might say, "My boss told me he understood and agreed with my feelings to go through with it." How could such a conclusion or distortion be drawn from your statement? The answer lies in your employee feeling validated and perhaps less guilty about an emotionally charged decision. This reinterpretation is called a "cognitive distortion." If the moment of decision to leave was at hand, your understanding might have been all it took to get the ball rolling. To avoid being in this position, always state that you do not wish to render an opinion in any way on such a matter. You are then safe to offer brief empathy, but, of course, refer to the EAP.

Q. I read recently that 60% of workers are too intimidated to bring a problem to their boss. I don't think my employees are in this group, but maybe I am fooling myself or in denial. How can managers help employees be more willing to bring their problems forward?

A. As a manager, you must continually "market" your approachability by what you say and do. Even if you believe you are a nice person with a soft disposition, you will need to help employees remember that. You do this by regularly engaging with them and inviting them to bring their problems forward. Managers, supervisors, and other authority figures possess degrees of control or at least hold influence over a worker's employment status. This is enough to prevent employees from feeling completely comfortable in bringing a problem to the boss, or in rocking the boat; they're likely to be unsure of how the boss will react. This is a natural dynamic associated with fear, but it is easy to overcome. Your awareness of this dynamic is half the battle. Your EAP is the perfect consultant to help examine your relationship with your work group, troubleshoot communication problems, and offer guidance on individual employee problems. Source: hbr.org search ["managers more intimidating"]

Q. I know giving employees feedback is important, but how do I know if I am giving them enough?

A. The best way to find out is to ask: "Do I give you enough feedback on your work—including both positive and negative aspects of what you do?" You will be surprised at how many employees say you are giving enough feedback when you believe it isn't that much. Others will say you aren't offering enough, even though you think you are giving plenty. The good news is that you will discover what employees need and will be able to allocate your time where it is wanted and needed most.