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The Frontline Supervisor

Q. My primary concern as a supervisor is whether the work is getting done, but I am hesitant about pressuring workers — the fear being that pressuring them and interfering with work-life balance will prompt thoughts of quitting. What's the solution?

A. Holding employees accountable is important, but it's equally important to not make them feel overwhelmed or micromanaged. Here are some tips: (1) Communicate about communication: Start by clearly communicating your desire to avoid communicating with them in such a way that routine follow-up is misperceived as undue pressure or dissatisfaction. This will lessen their anxiety when you do inquire about progress or completion. (2) Set clear expectations: Start by communicating clearly about what you expect from your employees but use a participative approach where they can help decide deadlines. Key: Be sure employees have what they need to succeed. This helps them take ownership for completing work on time. Don't follow up only about deadlines and progress. Also have frequent follow-up about resource needs, process questions, and problem-solving. Another key: If you model being on time with your work, and staying on task, you will influence workers to do the same and will ultimately have to follow up less.

Q. I created a letter of reprimand for my employee because of severe tardiness. He has always refused the EAP, but when I offered to put the letter aside if he felt the need to attend the EAP, he readily agreed. He hasn't been tardy since. What did I do right (or wrong) since this took so long?

A. Rather than continuing to recommend and plead with your employee to go to the EAP, you offered an appropriate disciplinary measure to be held in abeyance if the employee wanted to attend the EAP. (This is a pull strategy versus pushing your employee to attend.) The "either this or that" option motivated your worker to get help rather than accept the possibility of having a disciplinary letter in his file with its ramifications. The approach you used is sometimes called "performance-based intervention." Key to progress was your decision to end the badgering of your employee without success. Often in situations like this one, the employee knows they need help for a personal problem, but denial and procrastination contribute to a chronic cycle of non-change. You finally decided that change was non-negotiable. It is a key to the success of the strategy you used. Praise the positive changes but be prepared to intervene again if attendance issues return.

Q. I believe I could benefit from understanding more clearly what employees say are their main complaints about supervisors. What does survey research show?

A. An Interact/Harris poll of 1,000 U.S. workers in 2015 showed consistency with virtually all similar research, that communication issues topped the #1 complaint of employees. But this is only half the story. Delving deeper, these communication issues seem to separate themselves into nine major areas in order of how common they appear among supervisors. 1) Not recognizing an employee's achievements; 2) Not giving clear directions; 3) Not having time to meet with employees; 4) Refusing to talk with subordinates; 5) Taking credit for others' ideas; 6) Not offering constructive criticism; 7) Not knowing employees' names; 8) Refusing to talk with people on the phone or in person; and 9) Not asking about employees' lives. Imagine how easy it is to identify or discover whether any of these issues apply to you and how simple it might be to improve on any of them.

Q. Are some employees less likely than others to be successful with professional counseling? I think a few of my employees would never be successful at the EAP because they seem to be very difficult people.

A. Although some difficult employees under your supervision may appear less capable of being successful in counseling, the opposite could easily be true. All employees deserve an equal chance to improve job performance, so be careful not to allow biases to influence your decision concerning referral. Some employees may lack motivation to change, but this can be overcome by motivational counseling techniques. Other employees may lack willingness to trust a counselor, but with time spent focused on building trust and confidence, the primary problem can be addressed. Stigma is often addressed with education and awareness. Some employees with personality disorders may be more difficult to engage in counseling, but this tends to be a small minority of employee-clients, and much depends on the rigidity of defense mechanisms and willingness to engage in problem solving. Never assume resistance to counseling means a person is hopeless or beyond help.

Q. I am certain that my employee's performance issues are related to untreated ADHD, although as a supervisor I can't make this determination. However, I found an article online that absolutely defined his problems perfectly. Should I at least give it to him?

A. You should document the performance issues of your employee and make a referral to the EAP. Use a formal referral process if the changes you want are not forthcoming. It is not recommended that you give your employee material from the Internet that is meant to help him self-diagnose. Employees with ADHD (or any chronic condition with overt symptoms), usually know about their condition because others in their personal lives have confronted them about issues relating to it. There is great incentive at work to deny or hide personal problems, especially if they affect performance. It follows that you would not be the one who finally shines the light on his issues brightly enough to motivate him to get help when others have not.

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

