



The Frontline Supervisor

June 2020

Q. My employee shows up late to work, and I am about to write a corrective letter as a first-level warning. What negative effects of tardiness can I insert into this documentation? And how are supervisors affected if they ignore tardiness?

A. Effects of tardiness include resentment from coworkers, which can result in conflicts. This in turn affects productivity. Morale also suffers. Being chronically late has ripple effects for almost any part of the organization's operation, including customer service. Chronic tardiness is the type of problem that frustrated employees often end-run to the next level of management to lodge a complaint. You want to avoid management's coming to you, and instead be proactive with this problem. Failure to do so will earn you a reputation for playing favorites, being unfair, and being a pushover. If employees believe you don't care about tardiness, they may begin to ignore other rules and standards of excellence, and be less concerned about their productivity.

Q. What is the most important consideration to keep in mind when meeting with an employee to correct behavior or performance so the employee is cooperative, appreciative, and motivated to change?

A. The manner in which you speak to employees when confronting them about their performance plays a big role in facilitating cooperation and correcting their problems. Speaking down to the employee will elicit one type of response. Speaking "up" to the employee will elicit another. So approach any problem as though both you and the employee have a stake in its resolution, and as though it is a problem you mutually desire to resolve. This does not mean you as a supervisor will resolve it. It is still the employee's responsibility to correct noncompliant performance. However, this "mutual desire approach" aids cooperation, motivation, and focus. And it decreases defensiveness. This approach does not minimize the importance or severity of the problem. Share with employees that the EAP is a resource to help them find the solution, and obtaining a signed release of consent from the employee in the case of a formal referral is a way to facilitate appropriate communication.

Q. I am a new supervisor. I am feeling insecure about my job and the type of work I am overseeing. It causes me to be a little heavy-handed and dictatorial, based upon my position as “the boss.” How should a supervisor act when they are new and know the least about the details of the work unit?

A. New supervisors to an unfamiliar work unit must elicit from subordinates knowledge necessary to make decisions or choose courses of action. The words “I don’t know” or “What is your opinion?” or “I need to rely upon you until I get up to speed” are perceived by subordinates as compliments. Employees see such statements and questions from managers as respectful of their knowledge, thereby eliciting trust. Unfortunately, some supervisors experience great anxiety with this approach. Admitting what they do not know makes them feel incompetent and exposed. They unnecessarily fear subordinates will take advantage of them and disrespect their leadership role. They then believe they must resort to a “do what I say because I am the boss” approach. This has severe consequences because employees feel ordered around, less invested in outcomes, and less responsible. If you struggle with vulnerability as a new supervisor, talk to the EAP. They can work with you on a personal development plan that will accelerate your success as a supervisor.

Q. I have been referred to the EAP for bullying because I yell at my employees. Coach Vince Lombardi yelled at his football players, and so do drill sergeants. Even Steve Jobs of Apple, Inc., was known to yell at workers. And there are more examples — so what gives?

A. You can make millions leading a football team, and the more you yell, the more you might be loved and paid — if you’re successful. But context, tradition, and work culture are everything. Typically, employees in these big-mission and charismatically led organizations don’t feel subjected to a hostile, intimidating, or offensive work environment, at least not in large group meetings. With respect to you as a manager, yelling affects others adversely, demeaning people and humiliating them. When you yell, employees don’t hear you more clearly and more deeply. Fear and anxiety cause them to comprehend less of what you are trying to communicate. Your workers won’t engage with the organization more effectively if you scream. They will only tune out. You’re yelling because you want to move your employees to action. There are many ways to inspire your employees that will leave you feeling more satisfied about your position, and the EAP can show you how.

Q. I referred my employee to the EAP. He had a great experience, but last week told everyone in the lunchroom about it. He did not mention that he was referred by me. I kept silent to maintain confidentiality. It was awkward. Some saw my silence as disapproving. Any thoughts?

A. You did the right thing by not involving yourself in the public conversation about his EAP participation. Doing so may have turned the discussion toward you and the supervisor referral of your employee. The positive testimonial offered by your employee will not be diminished by your lack of commenting on the program. Although you did not publicly praise the worker for his participation, you can still encourage EAP attendance at any time through a memo to all staff or other communication channel. Doing so periodically is advised, along with mentioning the free and confidential nature of the program. EAPs rely upon word-of-mouth promotion to help keep their utilization rates high, so what occurred was a positive thing.

