



# The Frontline Supervisor

July 2019

**Q.** There is usually a lot of tension when I conduct annual reviews. If employees are surprised by the results or if their scores are less than they imagined they would be, I often face hostility and anger. How can I reduce this tension?

**A.** Follow the performance review process of your organization, but make the effort to increase communication. Meet with your employees at the beginning of the year and discuss with them what they would like to achieve in the coming year, along with other measures of performance consistent with the goals of your work unit and the organization as a whole. These goals should be achievable and measurable and include defined criteria for outstanding performance and lesser achievement. Meet several times during the year and coach employees toward success. Ask employees each time, during these meetings, how they would grade themselves against the performance criteria they set. At year's end, you should see far less angst at performance review time, more satisfied workers, and higher levels of achievement that benefit the organization.

**Q.** My employee went into treatment after he was informally referred to the EAP for attendance problems. He has a severe opioid addiction. He left treatment against medical advice after about a week, but he still seems to be doing well. I worry that this won't last. What should I do?

**A.** Meet with the EAP to discuss your role in monitoring your employee's performance and also learn about the symptoms of a relapse related to opioid addiction that may exhibit themselves at work. Although the EAP will not share confidential information, you can discuss signs and symptoms of relapse that you can document later, if needed. Absenteeism is the original problem you spotted, but others may include poor coordination, drowsiness, nausea, and slurred speech. In this situation, the chances of relapse are high since he displays a lack of motivation for treatment. If your employee left against medical advice, then it is unlikely that he is being followed by a medical doctor or taking prescribed medication. Talk with your HR advisor about your organization's fitness-for-duty policy. He or she can advise you on if and when it is appropriate to take advantage of it.

**Q.** Upon discharge from an alcoholism treatment program, my employee was allowed to come to work late twice per week, and to have extended lunches twice per week. I'm worried. What if coworkers are confused and ask questions since attendance issues were what led him into treatment?

**A.** It is more than likely that your employee is participating in certain Alcoholics Anonymous meetings that are not available after hours. You can't discuss the employee's health issues, but the reason for your employee's absence is unlikely to remain secret for long, because he will share this information with coworkers. This is part of the normal recovery experience. The EAP and aftercare program he attends see sharing one's diagnosis and responding to inquiries by others as opportunities to practice acceptance of the diagnosis as a recovering person. Acknowledging being in recovery is considered a positive thing, not something for which to feel shame. In this scenario it is appropriate to refer inquiries from others to your employee; however, you are unlikely to get any.

**Q.** I want to be a firm supervisor when necessary as well as a nice guy my employees admire. I think most supervisors feel the same way, but I find myself correcting employees more often than I praise them. How can I increase my positive interactions?

**A.** Establish communication habits to use daily with employees that help you improve your interactions and grow your reputation with them. When approaching an employee for any reason, lead with something positive so they do not learn to associate your presence with correcting performance, a negative interaction, or other painful exchange. Ask employees for their solutions to problems, and treat them like pros, regardless of the position they hold. Intentionally interact with your employees when things are going well—get out of your office so you aren't seen as a one-person fire department only interacting when problems arise or things go badly. Participate in small talk; use these moments to learn about your employees' needs. Praise and be in awe of their past achievements, not just the ones you witness on the job. Finally, look for roadblocks to their success. Pay attention to what is impeding performance, and find small ways to make their lives more comfortable.

**Q.** I read that great leaders are eternal optimists, along with many other traits. I would like to be more optimistic in my leadership style. However, am I able to change my outlook with help from the EAP? I realize how powerful this can be for employees, so I am open to whatever it takes.

**A.** Yes, you can learn to be optimistic. It starts with understanding the value of optimism for your work unit. Optimistic leaders exude positive energy because their attitude is one of hope and confidence about the work unit's direction and success of its goals. The good news is that optimism is a habit of thinking, acquired by changing a few beliefs, practicing new skills, and seeing the results from doing so. For example, you can learn the habit of challenging negative thoughts. You can also learn how to focus more on the solution to a problem than on the negative ramifications of it. And you can act and behave optimistically—even if you don't feel like it—and then observe the positive results for yourself and others. These exercises and more will, over time, flip the switch to help you practice a more optimistic leadership style. Read about optimism, discuss your goal with the EAP, journal your results, and watch the positive effects on those you lead.