



The Frontline Supervisor

September 2024

Q. Feedback for a supervisor is a good thing, but I hesitate asking directly for it because I fear doing so will make me appear weak, not as knowledgeable, or insecure. So, what is the best way to get feedback from employees I supervise, in light of these concerns?

A. Feedback is important, and you can get it while maintaining your appearance of confidence with strong leadership presence. In one-on-one meetings with employees, try asking open-ended questions, and listen carefully to remarks that pertain to your supervision or management style. For example, after your work unit completes a project, have a debriefing session to focus on what went well and what could be improved. Say to your team, “I want this discussion to be for everyone, so feel free to share any and all insights.” Listen carefully for what is and is not said that pertains to your leadership role. Another approach is to ask employees how you can be the best resource possible for them in the performance of their duties. Again, listen with your “third ear” to detect positive and negative perceptions of your role. Ask your HR advisor for recommendations too. They can be a tremendous resource for formal processes like surveys or 360-degree evaluations that gather information, encourage honesty, and reduce fear in sharing feedback.

Q. I have been a supervisor for 31 years. I am only four years from retirement. It seems there is hardly a management or leadership workshop topic I have not already studied. What more can be learned? What might I be missing?

A. Your extensive experience has prepared you well for the evolving challenges of managing people, and there will always be something new. Emotional intelligence is a field where continuous learning is possible, for example. The dynamics of human behavior and emotions are complex, especially in a diverse and rapidly changing workplace. Mastery in this area isn't a one-time achievement but a journey of understanding, empathy, and growth. Over the next several years, your organization may undergo dramatic changes driven by new technologies, AI, and shifts in personnel management. Change strategies will evolve, and new ones will emerge. If you're mentoring employees, think about fully committing to this effort. The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can support you with mentoring skills, such as active listening, providing constructive feedback, and utilizing effective coaching techniques. Mentoring can present challenges, and the EAP can help you address stresses or difficulties, offering resources, tips for cultural competence, and ideas for development plans.

Q. After an argument, my employee walked out the door, saying, “You know what? Someone in this place should decide to end it all.” I said, “Wait a minute. Can you explain what you mean by that?” He said nothing more and stormed off. I view this utterance as potential violence. What’s my next step?

A. As a supervisor, it's crucial to take situations like this seriously. Follow your company’s policies regarding questionable statements, and immediately report the incident to your superior or HR advisor. The organization may choose to assess the employee’s well-being, potentially involving mental health professionals. Document the incident in detail while it’s still fresh, as details may become harder to recall over time. Avoid confronting the employee or handling the situation on your own; your desire to deescalate or your belief that the event is benign could lead to biased decisions. This might cause you to incorrectly conclude that “the situation is resolved” or that “everything’s fine.” Discuss your emotional response to the situation with the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Once the issue is resolved, refer the employee to the EAP, and debrief with those involved to review how the incident was handled and what lessons were learned.

Q. I am stressed but don’t feel burned out. Maybe I am in denial. How do I know if I am experiencing manager burnout?

A. As you might guess, simply being stressed and under work pressure, even with much strain, is not necessarily an indicator of burnout. Manager burnout can creep up gradually. It is often unnoticed until it starts to adversely affect your well-being and productivity. Contact the EAP for an assessment and intervention strategies, and be on the lookout for these typical signs of burnout:

- **Chronic fatigue:** You may feel physically and emotionally drained, even after rest.
- **Cynicism:** You may become cynical, irritable, or indifferent toward your responsibilities or team members. This detachment and its accompanying attitude are coping mechanisms.
- **Decreased performance:** You may find that making decisions or maintaining productivity is increasingly difficult. Things that were once easy now feel overwhelming.
- **Health symptoms:** You may have physical symptoms like headaches and sleep disturbances.
- **Loss of satisfaction:** Things about your job that once got you excited and pumped up no longer do.

Q. Can you share a tip on helping an employee feel more positive about their job and our work unit—something besides praise, a raise, resources, or time off? What’s something I might not have considered before now?

A. Many things can have a positive impact on morale yet cost nothing; however, take a few weeks, especially after making a new hire, to be intentional about determining what might help boost an employee’s morale. For example, one-on-one meetings and real conversations about career goals, challenges, and what inspires them will give you ideas. Take note when your employees light up on the job and look excited. What triggered their “go button” and positive response? You might discover a brilliant employee loves to share ideas. So, try this: Include an employee in an important meeting—especially a meeting that involves key managers, influencers, or notables—because of their expertise. Let them in on the decision-making process. This may cause an employee to feel recognized, validated, and empowered, and it will add to their personal growth. Try this too: In the coming week, note what seems to inspire different employees, and take mental notes for the future.

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