

FRONTLINE

A newsletter from the WA State Employee Assistance Program

Questions



Last year, a very well-liked employee was in a fatal accident. Being the direct supervisor, I had to break the news to my staff. I quickly realized that I was not fully prepared to relay this type of information nor was I ready to handle all the emotions that followed. Are there any resources available to assist supervisors when a tragedy occurs in the workplace?



Supervisors want to avoid conflicts with employees, which is why many of us do not hold them accountable. I know lack of accountability is a significant complaint of top management, but this avoidance of conflict helps manage stress.

Answers



Yes. The [Employee Assistance Program \(EAP\)](#) offers managers, supervisors and human resource personnel the opportunity to consult with an EAP clinician to seek guidance on how to best approach the situation. The EAP also offers the *Incident Stress Management (ISM)* toolkit to be used when stressful situations happen in the workplace, such as employee deaths, threats of violence, natural disasters and other traumatic events. The ISM toolkit offers guides and handouts for both employees and management to be used to help manage trauma and grief within the workplace. Check out EAP's new [Incident Stress Management \(ISM\)](#) page to learn more.



Seeking to reduce conflicts is a worthy pursuit, but this is different from being “conflict avoidant.” Conflict avoidance is a dysfunctional approach to conflict management that seeks to evade or steer clear of disagreements, quarrels, and the work needed to resolve them. Problems therefore grow worse, rather than being transformed into opportunities that can lead to more efficient work systems and higher productivity. Conflict avoidance requires a decision by the supervisor to abdicate his or her responsibility for resolving conflicts. Supervisors who avoid conflict are typically unaware that systematic steps and procedures for resolving conflicts exist, and that conflicts can ultimately become success stories, not bad memories. EAPs have experience in conflict resolution and can play a consultative role to supervisors. Reach out and encourage your supervisor peers to do the same.

Frontline Supervisor

Questions



I am a new supervisor. I can see right away I am the “one in the middle” with my supervisor above me and the employees below me each needing different things. Tell me the number one mistake I am likely to make as a new supervisor.



I have an employee whom I consider lazy, but referral to the EAP for this problem doesn't sound like the right thing to do. Do you have recommendations about dealing with “laziness”?



I plan to make a supervisor referral to the EAP of an employee who chronically comes to work late. Should I also probe the reasons why? I don't think it really matters, and I probably won't get the whole truth, so why risk getting bogged down in excuses?

Answers



The number one mistake that you are likely to make as a new supervisor is failing to see your role as a “coach” instead of a “cop.” This slipup results from stereotypes you might hold of what supervisors do, insecurity about your supervisory skills, and fear of not being taken seriously. To reduce the likelihood of making this mistake, develop individual workplace relationships with everyone you supervise. Begin to understand five things about each employee—what their key skills are, what they want to learn more about, what motivates them, how much feedback they want or need, and their preferred form of communication. Down the road, check in to ensure these assessments are indeed correct. This will prevent a “barrier” forming between you and your employee caused by slow, simmering resentment toward you for not meeting his/her needs. If you are unsure about how to approach employees or communicate with them, call the EAP and devise a plan or approach before things get worse.



Some employees may appear disinclined to work or are slow to exert themselves to accomplish required tasks of their job. They may also appear sluggish. You are correct that a referral to the EAP is not the right step initially, but it may come later after you attempt the following work-centered interventions. Hold a discussion with your employee about how he/she feels about the job. Seek to uncover his or her attitudes toward it. Also, ask about his or her personal goals in relation to the work. Be honest, and say you have noticed a slow-moving work style, trouble taking initiative, not always getting things done on time, or other measurable behaviors. Don't label the employee as lazy. Stress the value of the employee's position in the organization, and see whether you can elicit a higher level of excitement. If this step fails, then refer them to EAP.



Yes, ask your employee why he or she is coming to work late. The reason for asking is to rule out any issue that could be work-related over which you have control or influence to change. Remember, coming to work on time is a requirement for most jobs, and it is a measurable performance issue. So you have a right to at least ask why he or she is not measuring up. If your employee discloses a work-centered reason for tardiness, try to address it. If your employee mentions a personal problem, accept the answer, but recommend the EAP as a resource for proper help. Talk to the EAP beforehand or provide documentation to the EA professional so proper assessment can be conducted.