

THE

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FRONTLINE

SUPERVISOR

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Helping you manage your company's most important resource - employees.

Can you recommend a quick conflict resolution strategy that supervisors can use? Is there such a “formula” – an A, B, C approach? Then, if that does not work, we can refer to the EAP.

There are thousands of books on conflict resolution, each with variations on the subject. This shows the difficulty in a cookie-cutter approach. However, where conflict resolution between two employees exists, changing the dynamic to elicit more cooperation between warring parties can help speed a resolution; for example, insistence by management that the conflict be resolved and having participants face some sort of penalty or consequence for failure to do so. Instantly the dynamic is one of cooperation, with the conflict itself, not the other party's perceived unreasonable demands, the bigger problem. Managers who do not understand this simple dynamic may fall victim to playing the role of cajoler, attempting to wheedle and coax employees into cooperating. This mistake puts more focus on the solution than on the inappropriate behavior of employees, and years may then pass without a resolution.

How do I correct an employee's bad attitude?

Asking how to help correct an employee's bad attitude is similar to asking how to resolve a pain in your neck. The next step is “Tell me more.” All supervisors will complain about an employee with a bad attitude at some point in their career. Typically, the description entails a negative and cynical communication style, disagreeable nature, suspicious view of management's motives, or someone whose statements consistently undermine morale. Attitude problems require the best documentation because these employees are often smart people with plenty of logic in their presentation style. Moreover, nearly all employees with bad attitudes have something valuable to say about needed change, so it is often a mistake to see them as entirely unreasonable malcontents. Verbal counseling is universally hailed as worthless by supervisors in creating long-term change. A supervisory consult with the EAP is recommended to develop a change strategy, and this will usually include teasing out any legitimate complaints.

I often see references to the importance of being yourself, being authentic and being a real person as a skill for supervisors. What does that actually mean? Does it mean being a certain way or making sure that you do not act in a certain way?

Being yourself, being genuine, being “real,” not pretending to be perfect, or learning how to be more available emotionally to employees all refer to the same thing: “authentic leadership.” This is a dynamic in supervision, the goal of which is to increase productivity of workers by establishing optimal relationships with them. The idea is to be professional but at the same time to balance this with approachability, friendliness, openness, and affability. The opposite of this is a supervisor who is physically and/or emotionally remote, detached, and mysterious to his or her employees. This balance is a learned skill. Supervisors vary widely in their ability to do it. Being authentic is not just being nonthreatening to employees but also being purposeful so the manager can elicit employees’ opening up to the supervisor so their strengths and weaknesses, personality, and working style can be better understood. This in turn allows the supervisor to help an employee maximize his or her potential. This improved relationship with the supervisor facilitates the workers also putting forth more effort.

We planned to fire an employee on Monday, but he entered a drug treatment program over the weekend. We were informed by a few of his coworkers. Should we get the EAP involved? How? We cannot reach the employee. Perhaps it isn’t necessary at this point.

There is much the EAP can do, but it cannot approach your employee to request he or she participate in the program. Consider contacting family members or the coworkers who contacted you to have the employee call the EAP. The EAP can assist your employee in follow-up, advocate for services after discharge, help arrange back-to-work conferences, monitor continuation and participation in whatever post-discharge treatment plan is recommended, and do long-term follow-up. All these services can help reduce the likelihood of relapse.

My employee has no job issues, but I am fearful of his return to absenteeism problems and angry mood swings everyone was seeing two weeks ago. Is it too late to make a supervisor referral to the EAP? Also, this same pattern happened about six months ago.

No, it is not too late to make a supervisor referral. Your documentation is important, of course. If you are unsure about its wording, consider consulting with the EAP. What you say and how you say it are also important, so consider discussing with the EAP an effective delivery. The EA professional can also help you identify additional key points to include in your constructive confrontation. You have a clear rationale for your meeting with your employee, despite not meeting with him two weeks ago. Motivation for your employee to follow through may be diminished, but an attempt still should be made because serious personal issues may underlie this type of behavior-performance pattern. The symptoms of many chronic personal problems can be concealed or suppressed temporarily, especially if the fear of not doing so is great.

From all of us at  Happy New Year!