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SUPERVISOR

Coastline EAP

401-732-9444 • 800-445-1195 • 800-833-0453 • www.coastlineeap.com

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

Can you give me some quick tips on giving feedback to employees? Specifically, how do I respond to their defensiveness? What should I say or not say in response that will increase the likelihood of their finally accepting what I have to say?

Feedback is more complex than it first appears. Not only is there a process for giving feedback, but there is also a bit of art to responding to defensiveness. Most employees do not relish constructive criticism, despite its value, so listen calmly to what your employee has to say and be understanding. You may not agree, but still say you “understand” the points he or she is making. Receptiveness to feedback (or something akin to it) is then more likely to follow, helped by your noninterference with the venting process. Do not equate defensiveness with total denial or complete rejection. After all, your feedback is truthful. What follows is likely to be your employee asking, “Well...can you explain more about what you mean?” This is an indication that acceptance is near. Your goal is not immediate 100% agreement with your feedback but agreement that your feedback includes things to be considered. That’s a win.

Regarding diversity in the workplace, what is the purpose of educating employees to understand the cultural norms of foreign-born employees while training employees from other countries in the expectations of the cultural norms in the USA?

When training foreign-born, new workers to understand American customs, you will not eliminate manners of communication to which they are accustomed. And frankly, that is not the goal of diversity awareness. Although you will not expect your American employees to adopt or practice the cultural norms of another country, educating them about what they are reduces the likelihood of improper statements, harassment, miscommunication, tension, and impersonal comments or questions that foul relationships between workers. So education works both ways. Body language, for example, varies widely among different cultures. Without some awareness training of your employees, how might they react, for example, to a coworker who does not smile back when greeted? For an interesting review of issues regarding personal space, touch, tone of voice, eye contact, silence, facial control, and feedback, check out some of the resources at DiversityCouncil.org.

I think it is important to coach my employees properly. Since we work in a customer service environment, being assertive is simply a skill that folks need to learn. I do not want to counsel employees about their personal problems, but drawing the line is tough. Any tips?

Certainly there is nothing wrong with teaching your employees assertiveness skills. The depth to which you explore this subject, however, may touch on or generate psychology-related discussions. And there is nothing wrong with that either. It is important not to wander into diagnosing employees or their intrapsychic issues associated with resistance to being assertive. Refer such matters to the EAP via self-referral. Also, be aware that it's tempting to analyze people and consider or explore their psychology. We all do it, but as a supervisor, you possess significant authority, and employees won't easily reject your attempts to drill down and ask personal questions or explore their personal issues. So proceed with awareness.

An employee says her husband is violent. She won't go to the EAP because she thinks he will read her mind and know it. Some employees are worried for her, but he is the only spouse who has brought roses to the office! Frankly, he seems nice. What do you think is going on?

There are many possibilities, but you should still encourage her to visit or phone the EAP to discuss her situation. A sudden crisis or incident may increase her motivation, but if she is a battered spouse, the reluctance you see now is not inconsistent with how victims of abuse sometimes react. This "battered spouse syndrome" frequently includes a belief or "omnipresent" feeling that the batterer is superior or in control of the victim. The victim may believe she is being watched. This PTSD-like response demonstrates true fear. Batterers sometimes demonstrate a pattern or cycle of growing tension, releasing it through battering, blaming the partner, and then demonstrating remorse and overindulgence (e.g., bringing roses to the office) to make up for the violence. The cycle then repeats. Do not eliminate the possibility of formally referring her to the EAP based on the impact on your work environment. It sounds drastic, but such a referral would be EAP-appropriate, and it could be life-saving.

As a new supervisor, I lack leadership experience and struggle with communication, delegation, and generally just trying to feel secure in my position. I admit to also feeling intimidated by those I supervise. Can the EAP help?

Yes, the EAP can help. You are describing a lack of basic skills and know-how, but additional issues you touch on are worth examining. These include anxiety, fear, and insecurity about participating in the supervisory role. All these issues are probably surmountable, but "book knowledge" may be only part of your solution. The personal issues may interfere with your ability to apply whatever you learn. There may be certain skills that are more difficult to learn than others. These may point to a need for counseling or perhaps coaching by another supervisor with the experience to assist you. The EAP can lead you to information about the supervisor role but also help you not undermine whatever you learn. There are many ways to acquire the material you seek online or through books and possibly courses. As you improve your ability to manage workers, the EAP can help you tackle periodic roadblocks to success and job satisfaction.

