

Frontline Supervisor



■ **Some of my employees think that I show favoritism toward one gender when it comes to things like assignments, who gets disciplined, or who gets desirable transfers. How can this be hostile or offensive? I disagree with the complainers, but regardless, what's the issue?**

Although you are not “harassing” anyone, the favoritism you show toward one gender makes it difficult for other employees to compete fairly for assignments or desirable transfers. So, arguably, the favoritism is an obstacle and makes the work environment unfriendly or hostile to some employees based on gender. You should ask employees to come forward and discuss with you their concerns, and you should make changes in the way you manage employees and offer assignments. Your ability to manage performance of employees, and especially troubled employees, could be hampered by your supervision practices that a reasonable person would view as unfair. Talk to the EAP and discuss your supervision style for some objective feedback. You’ll gain insight and garner some tips on improving your supervision skills and your relationship with employees.

■ **Some of my employees’ spouses lost jobs during the recession. Should I remind my employees about help from the EAP, support for a spouse or partner, help for affected children, etc.? I believe some employees don’t make the connection that children can be affected by a recession.**

Yes, remind employees during staff meetings or other occasions that the EAP is available to assist them with the distress associated with an unemployed spouse or partner at home. Many employees forget how the EAP can help them. Children can be especially affected by a recession and half the children in homes with an unemployed parent can be expected to experience behavioral changes, according to a recent New York Times/CBS poll. Currently, about one in seven children nationwide has an unemployed parent. Stress and depression may appear as difficult behaviors or poor school performance. Unexplained anger might be a problem that results from anxiety experienced in the home. You’re right, it’s appropriate to mention why the EAP can help because some parents may not associate child behavioral issues with the recession. Be cautious and avoid analyzing individual employee issues.

■ **What traits should I look for in employees likely to become good managers someday? Are managers “born” or can people learn to become managers?**

Managerial skills can be taught. However, there are many behavioral traits that support the role of a good manager. Keeping an eye open for some of them can help you spot employees who might be management material. Look for employees who are comfortable with who they are and have positive views of themselves. But also look for a corresponding interest in learning and growing. Obviously, a manager can’t be someone who hides behind a desk or prefers to be alone, so look for employees who like people, are assertive, “get out in front,” and

stay involved with the group. Honesty and the ability to make a decision, straightforward, to “tell it like it is,” are also important traits. Employees who are hesitant to share bad news, overcautious about choices, or withhold information others need to know, typically struggle with the role of manager. Employees likely to be good managers avoid cliques. Instead, they reach out, believing that everyone has a role to play and a valuable contribution to make. A manager does not have to be charismatic, but employees who make good managers demonstrate confidence that others see or sense.

■ **I keep struggling with documentation. When an employee is slow, appears tired, and acts sad, I call it “depressed.” It seems more to the point and descriptive. As a result, my documentation has been criticized. Not using labels is difficult. Can the EAP help me?**

An important part of employee assistance work is helping supervisors

learn the skills of documentation. Documentation can be tricky because you must convey what you see and hear but omit what you feel and conclude. This takes practice because it is tempting to focus on other factors that are subjective and emotional. The key is to avoid drawing conclusions about personal problems, stating how you feel about the employee’s behavior, conveying diagnostic impressions, or filling your documentation with drama. These things sabotage the usefulness of your documentation for administrative purposes. To improve your documentation, consider whether it describes what is measurable or observable. Depression (a medical term to avoid using in documentation) can’t be “seen”, but slow talking, days missed, lack of work progress, crying, and sad looks are observable.

■ **I am a new supervisor and one of my responsibilities is teambuilding. Is teambuilding used to simply improve or reinforce the closeness that team members feel with each other? Is that the goal?**

Teambuilding is an activity designed to improve team performance, but it is often underutilized as a productivity tool. With this in mind, observe your team during the year to identify areas that represent opportunities for improvement. Once these goals are identified, target them with teambuilding. Avoid doing teambuilding only for “teambuilding’s sake” because in the end, inspiration gained from it will not last. How well do employees work together, problem-solve together, and participate in give-and-take behaviors? Is there a lot of bickering or bitterness? Do small cliques gang up on others? Is the retort “that’s not my job!” frequently heard? Do employees withhold information to gain power rather than share it with those who need to know? Are e-mail communications problematic? Do employees trust each other? The resolution of problems in these and other areas is a great target for teambuilding.

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