

June 2007

The FrontLine Supervisor

Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource-- Employees

Resource Management Services, Inc. Your EAP Provider
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Q. My employees are under a lot of pressure to perform, and it seems that those who put in the most hours get ahead. Burnout risk is high, but competition keeps people from complaining. How do I spot early signs of burnout if employees don't complain?

A. Even if your employees do not complain about stress, you can still recognize behaviors that signal the adverse effects of overwork. Remember that behavioral symptoms can mean something other than burnout. You will never know for sure, so do not become a diagnostician to your employees. As you interact with employees, be on the lookout for statements or behaviors associated with being drained of emotional energy, being "snappy" and irritable, refusing to socialize with others, cynicism, appearing withdrawn and unexcited about events in the workplace that should perk them up, or possible complaints about relationships at home being troublesome. Consult with the EAP to learn about more symptoms, or for guidance on making a referral.

Q. My employee says things impulsively at meetings. He's disorganized, forgetful, and touches people a lot when he is talking to them. Some of us know this is probably ADHD. Should I quietly educate others about ADHD to alleviate their confusion and frustration so they can be more tolerant?

A. Although you may be correct about your employee's diagnosis of ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), it is highly improper and seriously problematic to discuss the subject with coworkers. The behavior of your employee is simply not acceptable. To intervene, you should treat him as any other employee, assemble appropriate documentation, and make a supervisor referral to the EAP based upon legitimate job performance concerns. You should not take responsibility for concluding that he has ADHD, and much less acting as if he has a disability as a result of it. You should NOT make conclusions or pronouncements about the employee's behavior to others. Even if you're wrong, it could make supervisory or management decisions that affect him subject to provisions under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Turn to your human resources advisor to learn more about this issue, but use the EAP to help manage the behavior.

Q. I have a few employees with negative attitudes, but if I can manage to keep other employees away from them, I am willing to tolerate their behavior because they aren't going to change. Is my approach to this problem acceptable, or am I avoiding the inevitable?

A. It would be convenient if difficult and unhelpful employees could be isolated, and then counted on not to affect the rest of the work unit. Unfortunately, even if you could isolate these employees, experience shows that attitude problems have tangible impacts on productivity that you may not see at first. Ripple effects follow. You should therefore take a proactive approach. Employees with attitude problems will display diminished commitment to their jobs and reduced loyalty to the organization, and they will not measure up to their potential. Don't fall into the common trap of assuming everyone will get used to, or learn to accept, the attitude problem. Depend on the EAP to show you how to document and confront employees who struggle with attitude problems.

Q. I don't think management should be responsible for a team's morale. Morale is a team issue. So employees should monitor their own morale and take steps to deal with it. Is this an unfair expectation?

A. In the anonymously written business book, *Team Secrets of the Navy SEALs* (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2003), the author captures the essence of high functioning teams and shows how the lessons learned from their success can be applied to the everyday business world. He argues that teams must nurture themselves, identify patterns of decline such as morale issues, and summon interventions to recapture their lost momentum. It is reasonable to expect that business teams can police their issues and address morale problems, but there is more to it than that. Where the SEALs are well funded and without competition, the teams you oversee may not be as well supported. Resources may be limited. And competition they face may be fierce. They need you on the outside looking in, and looking out for them. Morale problems spread like colds, and to ignore them or remain hands-off is a risky strategy for your organization. All teams, even the Navy SEALs, work within the context of a larger organization that must support them. When this happens, teams can thrive, set standards for themselves, resolve conflicts, and address morale problems.

Q. There is obviously more to listening than being available and attentive to what employees say. I received a poor rating on my annual evaluation from the company. What are the key issues supervisors miss with regard to listening to their employees?

A. A key measure of success in how well you listen to your employees is how they feel about you, and themselves, once you have finished meeting with them. Consider the common behaviors of managers who gain the trust of employees who come in search of a listener. When listening, do you show that you welcome the employee? Do you offer a smile or demonstrate a thankful attitude that your employee has come to call? Do you avoid interruptions and splitting your listening time with other tasks? Do you actively listen to employees? (Some supervisors listen to employees like a radio—hearing, nodding, but never looking up at them as they busy themselves with other tasks.) Do you validate the legitimacy of your employee's viewpoint, even if you disagree with it? Do employees leave a meeting with you feeling important and valued? To become a good listener, see this responsibility as an essential function alongside things such as budgeting or strategic planning. Doing so will produce happier employees and great returns.