

Frontline Supervisor



Resource Management Services 1-800-333-2095

■ **I am a supervisor overseeing an office with workstations that face each other in groups of four. Employees can hear each other's conversations, a few personality issues exist, and everyone seems to know each other's business. How can I reduce risk of conflict, tension, and communication issues?**

Assuming you can't increase privacy with physical barriers, have a team meeting to discuss reducing tension for better communication and psychological safety. Be positive; these are challenges of the work setting, not a "who's at fault" discussion. At the first meeting, ask workers to think about ideas and schedule a second meeting. You'll likely notice that immediate improvements follow. At the next meeting, members offer ideas. Consider having the team engage in a weekly "team health check" meeting. This brief, 10–15-minute gathering would be exclusively for team members, focusing on monitoring and maintaining the group's overall well-being. During these confidential sessions, employees proactively discuss any communication issues or concerns that need resolution. This open dialogue allows team members to address potential conflicts early. Confidentiality promotes trust, encourages honest communication, and allows a safe environment where vulnerability can thrive. As positive changes occur, the team may be tempted to stop the meeting. Keep it going to avoid slipping back into a less positive work environment. Ask the EAP to arrange a seminar to discuss basics of conflict resolution.

■ **My employee sent a letter to me with a list of complaints about my supervision style. He also copied my boss on the memorandum. None of these issues have ever been raised by the employee before now. I believe a reprimand is in order, but what about an EAP referral?**

This was a form of passive-aggressive communication not uncommon in the workplace. Consider, however, that a referral to the EAP solely based on this matter may appear as using the program as a retaliatory tool. You are angry but talk to the EAP first to process this incident. You are also likely concerned about the effect of the memo on your reputation, so meet with your supervisor to discuss it. Be sure to inform your supervisor that you are weighing the contents of the memo and will examine and address it and meet to discuss any valid concerns with the worker. Managers typically do not use one memo of this nature to render judgment of a subordinate manager, especially if no pattern of improper supervisory practices exists. It's important to be aligned and have the support of your manager should you decide that it is necessary and appropriate to conduct a corrective interview with your employee.

■ **I am a new supervisor and want to make sure I demonstrate I am a strong leader, a supervisor whom employees can trust and**

Your employees will notice your temperament, supervision style, communication skills, and approachability. But how does this awareness develop? First, employees assess your competence, your capabilities and expertise. Next, they observe how you communicate, evaluating your confidence, clarity, and effectiveness. They also consider whether you

who will support them. How will they judge my skills, style, and approachability over the next few months?

inspire them, a key factor in how they judge a supervisor. Beyond these, employees—consciously or unconsciously—pay attention to your fairness, empathy, and team interactions. They notice how you handle relationships, navigate difficult situations, solve problems, and manage conflict. Additionally, they observe your commitment to their professional growth and whether you take responsibility for your actions and mistakes. This is the checklist to keep in mind as you start your new job.

■ **I promised disciplinary measures against employees and then did not follow through when problems continued. My problem is that employees suddenly improve after these verbal confrontations, and then I am satisfied. Then problems return. Help!**

Managing difficult employees takes a focused approach. The EAP can help you understand how to do this successfully so risk of losing your employees by dismissal is minimized. When a supervisor promises disciplinary action but does not follow through, it undermines credibility and negatively impacts employee motivation to change behavior. This dynamic erodes trust because employees are less inclined to take your feedback seriously. Although not a conscious process, empty threats are an indication that no real consequences follow poor performance or misconduct. They simply won't feel an urgent need to change. Recognize that promising adverse actions but not following through encourages a work culture where employees act with indifference without valuing following the rules. Employees who do follow the rules may ultimately lose their motivation to engage fully with the work unit.

■ **Following a recent incident, we've decided to crack down on workplace bullying. I know we won't catch every instance, but what are the most subtle or hidden forms of bullying we should be aware of?**

Most bullying behaviors in the workplace are subtle and difficult to spot even when directly observed because they are frequently disguised as normal workplace interactions. This is also what makes documenting them a challenge. For example, deliberately leaving someone out of meetings or social gatherings can be hard to spot. It might just be an oversight rather than intentional bullying. Snide comments are a little more observable, but tone plays a major role in bullying dynamics, especially mocking, condescending, sarcastic tones. And what about excessive micromanagement? This could be explained by the bully as simply demonstrating concern for high standards. Ultimately, it is important to educate employees about workplace bullying. This does two things: encourages them to come forward and lets them know how to articulate a concern effectively. Talk to the EAP. It can help in arranging such training.

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