

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

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

September 2010

Q. We have a respect problem. It's my job to try to correct it, but how do I model respect? I know disrespect when I see it, but I don't know how to be strategic about this problem. Will employees even care?

A. Nearly all employees take behavioral cues from supervisors. How you act will set the stage for how employees in general will treat each other. You are an authority figure, and all employees learn early on to model the behavior of those who are in charge or are perceived as authority figures. To be strategic, consider the respectful behaviors you think need to be demonstrated. Demonstrations of respectful behavior in some areas will influence respectful behavior in other areas, so you don't have to consider every possible behavior. But start with these, and notice the impact over the ensuing weeks: Greet employees every day and be sincere when you do so. Express genuine concern for their interests and well-being. Give them a few moments to talk about their needs and what excites them. Really listen and make eye contact when you are spoken to. Compliment publicly when you see the opportunity so employees witness your positive behavior toward even the least senior of your staff. In particular, remark on the individual strengths specific employees demonstrate on the job.

Q. I know that domestic violence happens and that signs and symptoms can show up at work. How should supervisors respond, and should we take our cues for how to respond from the employee's assurances that "everything is alright." "not that bad."

or "it's all over now"?

A. Domestic abuse is a very serious problem that is not fully understood by coworkers or supervisors. It can quickly spill into the workplace and jeopardize employees' lives. There is no way for a manager to judge the degree of seriousness associated with domestic violence once it is discovered. Do not judge such incidents as "not that bad" or "over and done with" based upon the employee-victim's report. Victims typically minimize their plight to prevent management attention and coworker involvement. Supervisors may readily accept a victim's assurances that there is "nothing to worry about." When domestic violence is suspected, contact the EAP to discuss possible steps you should take, how to approach the employee, and what type of referral to consider. A formal referral based upon the impact of the discovery on the work environment is appropriate. A serious misstep is thinking that a supervisor referral will make things worse, is a punitive step that blames the employee, or is no longer needed because things "have blown over."

Q. Many employees who experience harassment, discrimination, bullying, or disrespect don't report it. However, it is important for supervisors to know if it's happening. How do we find out so we can play a role in preventing workplace violence? We aren't mind readers.

A. Beyond assigning tasks and evaluating performance, supervisors must get to know their employees individually. This does not mean prying into their personal lives but

rather getting to know them one-on-one so trust develops and they are willing to come to you with their complaints. Few supervisors understand this point: It is arguably a safety issue not to get to know employees one-on-one. Only a nurtured and maintained sense of trust between you and your employee will facilitate an employee coming to you with issues of personal and work-related importance requiring your intervention. Not all problems that employees have on the job are technical. Some are personal, but are work-relevant. These may include conflicts with coworkers, feelings of inadequacy concerning tasks, fear of making mistakes, and worries about anticipated technical problems that may arise in the future. These combined personal and work-related concerns will only be shared with supervisors who are trusted, and the burden of creating this trust is on you.

Q. My employee's desk looks like a bomb went off. This person is our office genius and numbers wiz. It's been like this for years. I am not sure how hard I should push to correct this problem. It looks bad, but beyond that, what other reasons support confrontation?

A. Employees with messy desks and work spaces are common complaints for supervisors. Adverse consequences of this problem may not be readily apparent, but they are numerous. It's important to know that causes of messy desks are not all equal. Some employees have work habits that lead to disorganization. Others may have personal problems, the symptoms of which are disorganization. So don't rule out the existence of a personal problem. Beyond appearance, consider these known costs of messy work areas: the offensive visual appearance other employees must endure; the financial impact of more frequently used office supplies; the lost time associated with delays in completing assignments or looking for things; additional work not given to

employees who are disorganized; dust and hygiene problems; the negative impression on customers; the negative reflection on the supervisor.

Q. When employees mention personal problems, for instance problems with a teenager, why is it not appropriate to give the employee a helpful book or instructional pamphlet on the subject, especially if the pamphlet is written by an authority?

A. Any employee assistance professional will tell you from experience that there is always more to the employee's story than the supervisor knows. For example, you may learn about the problems with a teenager, but be completely unaware of its root cause. Your employee may also be unaware of the cause. Difficulties with a teenager could be caused by dozens of possible problems in a family, the symptoms of which are troubles with a teenager. If you provide information about parenting a teenager to your employee, it could add to the delay in getting proper help.



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