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FrontLine Leader

Employees — Your most valuable asset

I want to be a firm supervisor and a nice guy my employees admire. However, I find myself correcting employees more often than I praise them. How can I increase my positive interactions?



A: Establish communication habits to use daily with employees that help improve your interactions and grow your reputation with them. When approaching an employee for any reason, lead with something positive so they do not associate your presence with correcting performance, a negative interaction, or other painful exchange.

Ask employees for their solutions to problems, and treat them like pros, regardless of the position they hold. Intentionally interact with your employees when things are going well — get out of your office so you aren't seen as a one-person fire department only interacting when problems arise or things go badly.

Participate in small talk; use these moments to learn about your employees' needs. Praise and be in awe of their past achievements, not just the ones you witness on the job. Finally, look for roadblocks to their success. Pay attention to what is impeding performance, and find small ways to make their lives more comfortable.

Can I direct an employee to stop complaining about problems to co-workers, which damages morale, and instead bring these complaints directly to me? And can I hold her accountable?

If complaining adversely affects the work climate and productivity, then it is reasonable to ask your employee to come to you instead of complaining openly. You'll discover in your career that there are employees who like to "stir the pot," or, more accurately, they enjoy having others listen to their analysis and diagnosis of the work unit's problems. Ditto with the organization's or supervisor's competence. Much complaining is motivated simply by a desire to engage and socialize with co-workers. It is easier to discuss a complaint or issue or open with a common concern than it is to offer an observation about the nice weather. This then becomes a habit of communication among employees. If needed, encourage the employee to visit the EAP, where she will find listening ears, and you can count on the discussion being one that helps the employee and supports the organization.

Why should employee mental health be of supervisor concern?

I may be old school in my thinking, but I think an employee's mental health is none of the employer's business. Still, I see a lot of articles in recent years about mental wellness in the workplace. What is the business case for so much attention to this subject? What can one supervisor do?

A: Employers pay high costs for mental health problems. On the low side, it's about **\$70 billion a year**.

Absenteeism, reduced productivity, and increased health care are the three big cost areas. If employers can influence mental wellness in ways that reduce these exposures, they can improve productivity and have a healthier bottom line.

So, mental wellness is not about intrusiveness in employees' lives but about creating work environments that have a positive impact on wellness.

As a supervisor, you have significant influence on promoting mental wellness.

Here are four examples:

1. Don't praise the employee who comes in early and stays late. This practice eventually erodes productivity and leads to burnout.
2. Encourage or insist that employees take regular vacations to recharge and refresh.
3. Don't expect employees to answer the phone, email, or engage in work around the clock.
4. Be a model for these behaviors yourself.



Poor job performance or unsatisfactory quality of work is obviously the number one issue with troubled employees. Beyond this, what is the most common problem among troubled employees, and how should supervisors respond?

A: The management research firm Center for Creative Leadership surveyed over 200 supervisors and discovered that the most common employee problem (other than poor job performance) is "inability to get along with others."

It's not uncommon for two employees to have conflict or friction, but beware of employees who:

- **Blame others for their problems.**
- **Make others feel guilty for not living up to their expectations.**
- **Show an inability to own "their half" of problems.**

- **Have little insight into their behavior.**
- **View discussions about their behavior as personal attacks.**
- **Are overly adept at making excuses.**

These behaviors in combination are unlikely to respond to a corrective interview with you. Consulting with Continuum EAP early on, along with well-written documentation is recommended. (If you need help with constructing effective documentation, Continuum EAP can help provide you direction on that, too.)