

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

December 2012

Frontline Supervisor



UConn Health Center EAP 860-679-2877 or 800-852-4392

■ **Our organization does not have harsh performance management systems, but I see employees compete pretty aggressively. What's the proper role of supervisors in managing competition so productivity and employee goals are achieved but negative effects of competition are avoided?**

Workplace competition has always been a controversial subject among those concerned with productivity. The subject is very broad and extensive literature exists. Competition is a tool for managing productivity, but like any tool it can be abused. When two employees compete against each other with regard to sales or productivity goals, this can be a good thing. However, if employees compete with no regard for working cooperatively with each other, conflicts can undermine the gains sought by the organization. Always seek to improve collaboration and teamwork among employees. This can help reduce aggression, conflicts, bullying, and morale problems. Always make it your personal policy and practice to promote shared goals and mutual respect. By modeling this supervision style, you avoid competing employees seeing you as a “cage fight” ringmaster, a distorted perception easily acquired by some employees and one that can lead to big problems.

■ **One of our employees was arrested for dealing cocaine in our town, but I never saw signs or symptoms of drug use. In fact, job performance was strong. What did I miss? This employee never looked disheveled. He was very bright and confident.**

Although there are signs and symptoms of cocaine use, it can be difficult to spot. Assuming your employee both sold and used cocaine during work hours, there may have been performance or attendance issues that conflicted with outside activities. A cocaine user or dealer could appear as a strong and confident person. Unless there was wildly unusual behavior suggesting toxicity, this would not justify a reasonable suspicion test. Don't confuse drug dealing with low-income or a disheveled appearance. Drug-dealing individuals are usually not hurting for cash. Many, if not most, are privileged, middle class, and the suppliers and supporters of their friends' drug habits. They don't deal on street corners. Always the common denominator for recognizing the most subtle forms of drug abuse is how close you are to your employee during the workday and how frequently you directly observe his or her behavior.

■ **One of the substances discussed in supervisor training was inhalants, like glue and other volatile materials. I can see alcohol and drugs being problems, but find it**

Inhalant abuse in the workplace is not common, but it can happen. Supervisors should therefore know about it. Nearly every workplace includes inhalants that can be abused. There are many types of inhalants, such as white out, felt-tip markers, and aerosols. Almost any type of volatile substance can be abused. If a drug-addicted employee wants to get high and his or her drug of choice is not available, risk increases that the next most available mind-altering substance could be used. In 2012, a NIDA report

hard to believe that inhalants could ever be an issue in the workplace. Is this a serious problem?

found that 15% of 8th graders had abused some sort of inhalant. Inhalants are the only substance of abuse used more by young people than by adults. Age alone does not necessarily preclude participating in the abuse of inhalants, however. You can read the updated NIDA report on inhalant abuse at www.drugabuse.gov (search screen: “inhalants”).

■ How can I get employees to come forward in a straightforward manner to discuss their concerns about the work unit? Some pout and complain to peers but in meetings never speak up. I think the behavior leads to morale issues and encourages similar behavior in others.

Even if there are plenty of opportunities to raise concerns with you about the work unit, some employees will remain silent, and seek to air their frustration with coworkers in gripe sessions. Doing so is a dependable way to gain sympathy, bond with peers, or join with others who do the same thing. Some of this is not harmful, and most workplaces experience some of it. A problem arises when this becomes a primary way of venting frustrations. These employees are keeping valuable information from you that could improve the efficiency and productivity of the organization or work unit. Encourage employees and meet with them one-on-one during the year. If permissible, consider adding “ability to share information and concerns” as part of their review, and establish standards for “outstanding” and “unsatisfactory” performance on this matter. Don’t forget to consider a referral to the EAP if this problem isn’t resolved. With assistance, you will guide employees toward the new behaviors you need them to acquire.

■ My employee has an intimidating effect on others. It’s not bullying. This person is big, strong, deep-voiced, and smart—almost a charismatic presence. Most people stop talking when this person speaks. The negative impact is suppressing other people’s ideas. How do I help the other people?

Meet privately with your employees. Share your observations and what you see as unwillingness to speak up and offer ideas or information in group meetings. See what feedback or explanation each offers. Your employees may need some assertiveness training. Start with this approach and observe what happens when employees behave more assertively. Is there acceptance and receptivity by the other employee? If not, a large problem exists. The EAP can consult with you about the management of this situation. Intimidation is a strong word. It implies that the behavior is filling your employees with fear, and with the force of personality and superior talents, employees are cowed and remain uninvolved at meetings. Behavior that forces or deters others can be documented for the purposes of an EAP referral or corrective interview by you.

NOTES