

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

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Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **I read online that employees who experience a lot of stress on the job have a higher risk of stroke. How can I help alleviate this risk as a supervisor? Frankly, I could see it happening with some of the employees in my work unit.**

The study you cite was huge. It analyzed six studies with more than 130,000 people who were followed for 17 years on three continents. It showed men with severe work stress were 22% more likely to have a stroke, and women were 33% more likely. When researchers classify stress, they focus on job characteristics involving time pressure, mental load, and coordinating burden. These are target stressors. Discuss with employees ideas of how to reduce them. Seek to discover how and where employees can have increased control over their work. The degree to which this can be done mitigates these factors. You may be surprised by the types of jobs that include severe pressure. Some are nursing aides, waitresses, and other service industry positions. Conference and wedding planners also experience these pressures. Test your assumptions and ideas, and encourage employees to use the EAP when you detect or learn of personal problems that compound the work stress they already experience. <http://healthcare.utah.edu> [Search “job risk stroke”]

■ **What are the most important skills for developing employees into strong team players? Can the EAP be a resource for me in being more effective with whatever these skills might be?**

The relationship with employees is your most important “tool” for helping them grow into productive and satisfied workers. Being a good reviewer and evaluator, along with knowing how to provide feedback, are the skills you seek. To do these things well, 1) Create an environment where employees expect feedback. 2) Train employees to do self-assessments well so they challenge themselves. 3) Know what you want to measure, and don’t keep it a secret. 4) Encourage your employees to come to you early with concerns, and praise them for it with a welcoming attitude. Recognize this is one of most powerful yet underappreciated dynamics of effective supervision. 5) Think about how you want each of your employees to develop based on his or her temperament and skills. 6) Always plan feedback, even it’s for a minute, so it is given effectively and well-received. 7) Use the EAP to help you develop and enhance your relational skills in any of the above.

■ **How do I keep my best employees motivated? I spend most of my time with those who need help or have**

Although magnificent performers may appear to replenish their motivation continuously, it won’t stay that way for long without your playing a key role in fueling their excitement. You may never notice discontentment, but they are likely to leave and work for someone else. You will

troubles of one type or another. Is it unfair to assume that self-motivated high achievers maintain peak performance without much of a supervisor's attention?

get little or no warning that they are growing disenchanted with the status quo. Use three strategies consistently. 1) Praise the employee in front of others (not his or her peers necessarily, because that could get old, but others to whom the employee looks up—top managers, community notables, thought leaders, etc.). 2) Ask the employee how his or her job is going, and discuss ideas, new approaches, new products, and the “next new thing.” 3) Consider what your employee can do that’s new and creative, or that has significant impact on the organization. The message you send is how much he or she is valued.

■ **There are many important issues in our society, so why is it that EAPs don't take a strong advocacy position on issues such as political, economic, racial, and social justice? People respect the EAPs, so I think they could be powerful players in influencing change.**

EAPs must remain “a program of attraction.” This is a promotional principle that states utilization and attraction to the program will remain highest and benefit the most people, and thereby help reduce risk, by remaining neutral and avoiding positions or advocating for causes that could unwittingly alienate, push away, or disaffect any would-be users. This dynamic is crucial to understanding the powerful role EAPs play in organizations. It was borrowed directly from the traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous, which has the same program of attraction upon which its long-term success is based. Like EAPs, it also is apolitical, neutral, and noncontroversial. EAPs therefore do not take sides in management/employee disputes, which would risk alienating large swaths of the workforce. So EAPs are not social advocacy programs. They do not march for causes. To do so could risk losing value for the host company, with potentially lower utilization, possibly by the most at-risk employees.

■ **I am a new supervisor and fear responsibility of this job. I have the ability to do it, but how do I get past this anxiety I feel? Can the EAP help? How?**

Yes, the EAP can help. Phone the EAP to discuss your concerns and work with the employee assistance professional. Fear of anything new is normal, but it appears you are also excited and thankful for the position. That will likely help you overcome your concerns. Two things are keeping your anxiety high. You haven't worked as a supervisor before, and doing it is important. And you have visions of disaster that fuel your anxiety. The EAP will help you develop an action plan and suggest ways to practice detaching from fear associated with the job. One technique the EAP may teach you is how to stay in the moment and focus on what you have to do rather than skip to the future and imagine negative outcomes. This is called “staying in the now.” The EAP will also share other cognitive strategies or find additional resources to assist you.

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