

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

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

June 2006

Q. I like to counsel my employees—and reprimand them—via e-mail. I write well and prefer to convey my points in print. But my boss says I'm scared of confrontation and I should communicate face-to-face. Should I give up what works for me?

A. Most people would rather have a face-to-face conversation with their supervisor over sensitive matters such as weaknesses in their job performance. Even if you're a fine writer, the fact remains that you will advise and reprimand employees more effectively by looking them in the eyes. An e-mailed reprimand can appear cold and harsh to the recipient, but the same message can resonate more fully amid the give and take of a respectful conversation. Studies show that a significant portion of our communication is nonverbal and based upon tone. These key factors of communication are completely eliminated with e-mail reprimands. A corrective interview with your employee keeps your conversation more confidential as well, whereas an e-mail can be forwarded. If you are not comfortable with face-to-face meetings, don't overlook asking the EAP for some help on improving your supervisory skills.

Q. When I run group problem-solving sessions with the 10 employees on my team, we seem to have difficulty focusing. What does the research say about how to make the best use of the group in brainstorming sessions?

A. To maximize the creative energy in your brainstorming sessions, break the participants into groups of three, four, or five. Teams of this size perform complex problem solving better than if the employees operate individually or in a larger group, according to recent research by the American Psychological Association (April 26, 2006). Small groups outperform individuals because they can bounce ideas off each other, refine their thinking, digest information more accurately, and identify errors more readily. Researchers found that groups of two performed at the same level as the best of two individuals working apart. They theorized that a group of two is too small to benefit from the diverse contributions of a slightly larger group. However, as size grows, individuals easily withdraw or contribute less by hiding among the largeness of the group.

Q. I know that I should be patient while my employee is in the EAP. But each day that his performance suffers makes the rest of our jobs much harder. Is there any way to "rush" the process to get faster results?

A. Some employees make great strides after just one or two meetings with an EAP professional, while others progress incrementally over time. Each situation is different. There's no way to speed the process. However, it is important to know that a referral to the EAP does not obligate you to wait for performance to improve. If this were the case, not many supervisors would support EAPs. If your employee cannot perform elements of his or

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her job satisfactorily because of health or mental health reasons, it is incumbent upon the employee to request adjustments or accommodations. Show interest in the employee's situation, and offer your support and encouragement along the way. Ask the employee to open up about his or her challenges on the job. Present yourself as a supervisor who wants to clear away obstacles so that the individual has the tools and confidence to make a greater contribution.

Q. *I'm sympathetic to a worker with personal problems that are affecting her performance. She doesn't want to go to the EAP because she says she's "had it with therapy." I know I can't force her to go. Isn't it better to respect her wishes?*

A. It is appropriate to tell your employee that the EAP is not the same as psychotherapy. From your perspective, it is her performance that concerns you. Be clear about this when making any supervisor referral. Few employees who visit EAPs are referred to psychotherapy. Your employee may be resistant to working with the EAP if she knows personal issues will be identified that she does not want to address. You can't control what she ultimately decides to do. The EAP professional will work with her to develop actionable steps and strategies. After your referral, your employee may continue to deal with the situation on her own and avoid the EAP. It will then be necessary to consider how to respond to her increasing performance problems.

Q. *We use 360-degree evaluations. When I receive the feedback reports from my bosses, I often disagree with their criticism. How can I correct their faulty critiques without sounding defensive?*

A. Approach others as if their criticism is objective and potentially accurate. You can't reverse this process without appearing defensive. Make an earnest attempt to dig for more information in order to understand their point of view. Be genuine because you have more to gain for doing so. If they express criticism in vague or general terms, calmly ask for examples. This is the point at which things will become clearer. If they cite a specific instance of what they deem your poor performance, ask for a definition of what constitutes good performance in that case. As long as you inquire with an open mind and friendly tone so that it's clear you want to learn and grow, then you will not come across as defensive. The best way to disagree with their input is to state your intent and ask them to help you strategize. An employee who accepts criticism well shines among peers. If you struggle with this skill, consider talking to the EAP.



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