

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

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

State of Minnesota Employee Assistance Program 651-259-3840 or 1-800-657-3719

■ I had an employee with a lot of personal problems at home and at work. After a domestic dispute, the employee reportedly collapsed and couldn't walk. Doctors couldn't figure it out, but one said it was caused by stress. Now I've heard everything! Is such a thing possible?

Although it is unusual, the answer is yes. The human body can endure a lot of stress, both physically and psychologically, but the more stress one is subjected to, the greater the risk for overload. The result can be the physical manifestation of the stress imposed by the nervous system. In this case, you are describing a "conversion disorder," which is a mental illness characterized by loss of physical functioning without any physiological reason. The symptoms usually appear suddenly and under extreme psychological stress. If while at work a stressed employee demonstrates behaviors or performance concerns that are not acceptable, consider a supervisory referral to the EAP. Some people over-adapt to stress in their lives or personal environment, and their denial of its effects may contribute to their increased risk of severe or unusual stress reactions.

■ I think strong leaders can't be concerned about how well they are liked by employees. However, some leaders are well-liked, and they accomplish great things. What makes these leaders different? How can I be more like them?

You are describing the difference between a good leader and a good boss. Great leadership does not always accompany traits that endear the leader to those they supervise. Many leaders accomplish great things and earn respect, but may not be viewed as good bosses. Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, is a legendary leader. He had a reputation for firing the bottom 10% of his managers each year. He was named "Manager of the Century" by Fortune magazine, but what about "best boss"? Being a good boss can be tough work because you must have skills that go beyond leadership to include great listening ability, excellent communication and common courtesy. A good boss understands and empathizes with people from all backgrounds, all races, both genders, and all ages. The good boss is never "too good" to associate with employees and demonstrate the "common touch." Develop these soft skills and you can become the leader you want to be.

■ Can you provide a range of different issues and factors to consider when I am observing an employee's performance?

Observing performance can be more complex than most supervisors realize. Proper observation of performance is more than just seeing how tasks are performed. It also includes many other observation points, each of which tells a piece of the performance story. Consider some or all of these "lookout points" to produce a more complete picture of how your employee is doing: skills, abilities, motivation, quality of work produced, conduct, appearance, vitality (energy level or liveliness), attitude, eagerness to learn, availability, ethical decisions, initiative, safety consciousness, mindfulness of policies and procedures, cooperation with others, and team interaction. You'll find that annual performance evaluations are much easier when you practice good observational skills that make documentation easier to produce.

■ When I meet with employees to go over their performance evaluation, what can I say to help those who receive unsatisfactory ratings feel less hopeless and fearful about their job security without undermining their sense of urgency to improve performance?

A straightforward approach with your employees is usually your best tactic. Rather than saying something for the purpose of having your employees feel better, re-frame how the issues raised in the evaluation amount to a "road map" that points to exactly what needs to happen in order to arrive at the goal. With this approach, motivation to "get going" will increase, and employees will be less affected by fear and hopelessness that can rob motivation. Ask employees if they understand the concerns identified in the review. Take the approach that you and your employee are on the "same team" working toward the same goal. This eliminates the "me vs. you" mentality so frequently found in supervisory relationships. You'll inspire your employees and greatly aid your employer.

■ I have several difficult employees. Each has his or her own way of causing problems associated with communication, productivity, morale, and interpersonal conflict. In "EAP speak," is there a difference between a difficult employee and a troubled employee?

The term "difficult employee" has been used predominantly by journal writers, pop business columnists, and management book authors. It is not as frequently seen in professional EAP literature, which prefers the term "troubled employee" to more accurately describe the nature of the problem facing the manager: an employee performing unsatisfactorily in some way, who may have an underlying personal problem that affects quality of work, attendance, or behavior on the job. The implication presented by most "difficult employee" advice books (over 4000 at last count on Amazon.com) is that the difficult employee is "your problem" to solve, with the advice, wit, and strategies offered by the author. Within EAP literature, the goal is to assist managers in understanding how to focus on performance, and to make a supervisory referral to the EAP the safest, most effective choice for the employer who is having to work with the troubled employee. That focus is on motivating the employee to identify and resolve personal problems that underlie the difficult behavior that you see.

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