



THE SUPERVISOR/HR NEWSLETTER

Public Employee Benefits Alliance

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APR.
18

April Online Seminar

Maintaining Respect and Civility in the Workplace

Identify methods to assertively address inappropriate conduct within the workplace to promote a healthy work environment.

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2018 Supervisor Excellence Webinar Series & Leadership Certificate Program

Managers/supervisors who attend 5 of the 6 webinars will receive the Deer Oaks 2018 Leadership Certificate. Attendance is captured when viewing each recording. There is no other registration needed.

Session Recording Links

Preparing to Lead Effectively

<https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/recording/8571220193555391745?assets=true>

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Managing When the Stress Doesn't Go Away

Some traumatic events overwhelm us with their suddenness. An employee is assaulted, or a tornado rips through an office. Most people are shocked and shaken by the enormity of the event and its unexpected nature.

In recent years, people in several parts of the country have had to cope with rebuilding their homes and lives after a disaster, while taking on new roles and responsibilities to help the community's recovery. Natural disasters are not the only source of long-term stress that employees may face. Threats of violence, whether from terrorism or street crime, can lead to severely stressful situations that go on for weeks, and affect many people. Harassment campaigns directed against employees can be nerve wracking even when there is no apparent physical danger. The prospect of losing a group member to a slowly debilitating illness can produce a long period of stress for everyone involved. Organizational change can produce severe stress if employees feel uncertain and worried for long periods of time.

Getting the job done and taking care of employees under conditions of severe, long lasting stress can be one of the most difficult challenges a manager may face. It's not easy to take charge, develop innovative approaches, and be sensitive to the needs of others when you're at least as uncomfortable as your subordinates. There are, however, some management approaches that have proved helpful in these situations:

Take steps to reduce the sources of the stress.

If danger is a problem, call the right law enforcement authorities immediately, and get all the advice and support you can from them. If employees are overwhelmed by competing demands in the aftermath of a large-scale emergency, set clear priorities and make sure they are consistently followed. You probably cannot fix the entire situation, but you can improve it. Your employees will feel better if they know you are working on their behalf.

Communicate with your employees.

This is always important, but even more so when everyone is under long-term stress. In most stressful situations, one source of anxiety is a sense of being out of control. Your employees will feel better if they have up-to-date information and permission to approach you with their questions. Depending on circumstances, you may want to adopt new communications strategies, such as having frequent meetings, publishing an informal newsletter, and keeping an updated notice board in a central place.

- Employees will have a greater sense of control if you are careful to listen to them with an open mind before making decisions that affect them. Even if your decision turns out not to be the one they would have wished for, they will feel less powerless if they believe that their ideas and preferences were given serious consideration.
- Communicating with employees may be difficult for you if your own tendency, when under stress, is to withdraw from other people, or to become less flexible than you normally are. Both are common stress reactions, and can interfere with your leadership if you don't monitor yourself.

Encourage teamwork and cooperation.

Under long-term stress, there is no substitute for a supportive, caring team. Employees will find the situation, whatever it is, less painful if they are surrounded by coworkers who care about them, and will listen if they need to talk, or lend a hand if they need help. A group accustomed to teamwork rather than internal competition will usually be able to cover for members who are temporarily unable to function at 100% effectiveness.

Ideally, your group has always been strong and cohesive. If not, do what you can to help it pull together under stress. Encourage and validate teamwork and cooperation. Avoid any appearance of favoritism and make it clear that there is opportunity for everyone to achieve and receive recognition.

Set clear work standards.

Doing good work is always essential, but even more so in times of high stress, since success can bolster self esteem and group morale. Keep your standards high, but allow as much flexibility as possible in how the work gets done. If you set clear standards, but give employees some freedom in working out ways to meet them, they will probably be able to develop approaches that fit the contingencies of the stress situation.

Check on how much flexibility you have with regard to such conditions as work hours, administrative leave, alternate work sites, etc. You and your employees may have options that you haven't considered.

Make it clear that to your employees that this is a difficult period, and it's OK to share feelings of anxiety, fatigue, or frustration. If you set the example by letting people know you can do a good job even though you are not feeling your best, you can set a positive example. Define the situation in a way that emphasizes the strength of the group while acknowledging the challenges it faces. The tone should not be, "Poor us," but rather, "This is hard, but we're going to hang together and get through it."

Acknowledge the value of professional counseling, and encourage your employees to get whatever help they need.

Long-term stress can wear down the coping resources of even the strongest person, and it makes sense to get extra support in order to preserve mental and physical health. One strategy is to bring in an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselor to talk to the group about stress management. Besides learning from the presentation, your employees will develop a personal contact that can make it easier to turn to the EAP if they need it.

Don't underestimate the impact of stress on you as an individual.

Attend to your own stress management program, and use your resources for professional consultation and counseling. You will find it easier to take care of your team if you also take care of yourself.

Source: U.S. Office of Personnel Management. (February 2003). Managing when the stress doesn't go away. In A Manager's Handbook: Handling Traumatic Events (Chapter 7). Retrieved October 31, 2016, from <http://opm.gov>.

Ask Your EAP!

The following are answers to common questions supervisors have regarding employee issues and making EAP referrals. As always, if you have specific questions about referring an employee or managing a workgroup issue, feel free to make a confidential call to the EAP for a management consultation.

Q. What role can supervisors play in helping prevent sexual harassment? Please address modeling and work culture.

A. Supervisors represent employers and possess authority, so what you say and do is viewed as a standard of behavior, and may be directly modeled by workers under your supervision. In this sense, the actions are “amplified.” Given this dynamic, not addressing inappropriate behavior when you witness it indirectly gives permission for it to be repeated. Your employees will take notice of what you say and what you don’t say, and what you do and what you don’t do, in determining how they should behave at work. Think back about past employers during your career. Was sexual harassment more likely to occur with some rather than others? Where harassment was less likely to occur, it is likely an institutional mindset existed to help communicate the unacceptability of such behavior. This is a top-down phenomenon reinforced by supervisors. This is part of your job — creating and nurturing an institutional mindset for a psychologically safe workplace and an environment less predisposed to behavior that could be considered sexual harassment. When you correct someone’s behavior, be sure to also say to employees that the “type of behavior being discussed is not appreciated in this workplace.”

Q. Perhaps others won’t admit it, but I am hesitant to confront an employee who might be under the influence unless it is pretty obvious. A lot of employees drink, but if someone looks sober and is functional, that’s what matters to me. Where am I going wrong?

A. If you are trained to identify signs and symptoms of an employee who may be under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, it is crucial to follow the guidelines of your drug-free workplace policy. Employees in mid-stage alcoholism, even if their blood alcohol level is relatively high, do not necessarily appear drunk. They are, of course, still at risk for accidents and injuring others. These employees eventually discover maintenance drinking, where they consume alcohol in small amounts to maintain a blood alcohol level that prevents the agitating effects of withdrawal that are noticeable to others. When you do confront your employee, anticipate significant resistance and defensiveness because you have overlooked this problem for so long. So, talk to the EAP and request help preparing for a successful, constructive confrontation. Is your resistance to confrontation based on fear? If so, the EAP will help you overcome this resistance as well.

Q. I don’t want to be the cause of my employees burning out, but there is no way I can distribute less work to them. Can you offer tips for how to balance these issues? Any hard data to back up those tips?

A. When discussing burnout, it is important to describe what the term means, given the context of the work situation. A report from the National Institute of Health in 2017 reminds us that burnout is not an official mental health diagnosis, that the definitions are drastically nonuniform across research studies, and that many symptoms included in these definitions are also associated with depression. So, who is burned out and who is not is not easy to determine. A recent Gallup survey of German workers may have discovered an answer that will help you in considering how to engage with your workers. Those who received regular praise and recognition for good work, had proper materials and equipment to deliver quality work, and felt their opinion counted had lower feelings of burnout. How much control do you have over these factors? It appears that most supervisors have a quite a bit. Source: www.gallup.com [search: “German Workforce Stress”].

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