THE SUPERVISOR/HR NEWSLETTER

Public Employee Benefits Alliance

HELPFUL RESOURCES FROM YOUR EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

June 2020

June Online Seminar

Say What You Mean the Right Way

Identify barriers to clear communication and discuss how to apply tips for effective communication.

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Deer Oaks 2020 Supervisor Excellence Webinar Series
Employee Engagement

Advanced Communication Skills that Improve Employee Motivation
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Register: https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/794103984746779139

Successful Approaches to Difficult Employee Conversations
May 4th, 1:00 – 2:00 PM CT
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Maintaining Effective Communication Channels
August 3rd, 1:00 – 2:00 PM CT
Register: https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/5196350630268998915

Advanced Coaching Skills for Leaders
November 2nd, 1:00 – 2:00 PM CT
Register: https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/8703449675246617347

How to Supervise a Remote Work Team

Even before the current pandemic, the number of remote workers in the U.S. has been on the rise. In fact, the number of full-time remote employees in the U.S. has grown by 173% in the past 15 years. Due to recent events, many more Americans have transitioned to working from home for safety reasons.

Research studies have shown that working from home can potentially increase the wellbeing and personal productivity of employees. A Boston College study cited that remote workers tend to have lower levels of stress and burnout, and a Stanford study noted that by working from home, an employee's productivity can increase by as much as 20 percent.

The Challenges of Supervising Remote Workers

Although there are many benefits of working remotely, remote employees have unique needs for technology, communication, and management support. Supervisors who are called upon to manage remote workers can face challenges in several areas, including:

- **Communication** – Individuals working from home can feel disconnected and may need more frequent contact with their supervisor.
- **Productivity Management** – It can be more difficult to monitor the day-to-day work and overall productivity of individuals that you don't physically see every day.
- **Maintaining Team Unity** – It can be harder to keep remote team members bonded, on the same page, and working cohesively together when they aren't in the same physical workspace.

Strategies for Effectively Supervising Remote Employees

1. **Be Inclusive and Responsive to Remote Staff**
    Since remote workers have unique needs, supervisors have to be willing to go above and beyond their typical management approach, including:

    - Reaching out to provide support including IT, office supplies, etc.
    - Providing more frequent communication. Remote employees can feel disconnected and delays in communication can make it worse.
    - Ensuring that team members consistently include remote workers in correspondence, meeting invitations, etc.

2. **Focus on Relationship Development**
    According the "Leadership Challenge", effective leadership is about building relationships with your staff. Since it can be more difficult to maintain strong relationships with employees that a supervisor doesn't see every day, it's important to establish a dependable communications rhythm with each remote worker, including:

    - Establishing a consistent check in process, 1/1 meetings, etc.
    - Offering support, discussing priorities, following-up on work in-progress, etc.
    - During check-ins, don't just focus on business. Show interest in the employee's family, life outside of work, etc.

3. **Make Sure the Team Stays Bonded**
    Teams that have close relationships and feel like a "work family" are typically much more productive than teams that don't have good connections. Team bonding can be more challenging when all or some of the team members work remotely. Proactively focus on team building activities, such as:

    - Holding regular team meetings, project conversations, etc., and ensuring that all team members have the technology to access meetings.
    - Utilizing ice breakers or other team building activities during team meetings for relationship development. These types of activities bring team members closer together.
    - Scheduling virtual team building activities including coffee breaks, pizza parties, gift exchanges, etc.

Source: Greg Brannan, Director of Business Development, Deer Oaks EAP Services

5 Ways to Maximize Your Remote Workforce

As businesses transition their traditional workforce to working remotely, many are finding that some positions are harder to convert than others. Still others are encountering business slowdowns that are leaving workers with unproductive time on their hands. Layoffs or furloughs may seem like the only options, but both carry the risk of costly knowledge leak. Employers interested in retaining their workforce can take a page out of seasonal businesses' playbooks to discover ways to best utilize employees during this time.

1. Participate in professional development.

Employers know that professional development is important but often have a difficult time pulling staff away from essential job functions to participate. For some employees, now is an ideal time to catch up on those training initiatives. Professional development can take different forms, which can include listening to industry podcasts, reading leadership development books, or attending online courses.

Professional development can be specific to an employee's job function (ex. brushing up on Microsoft Excel skills) or more generalized (ex. handling conflict at work). If your training budget is limited, many of the software programs you may already have, Microsoft 365 for example, offer complementary online tutorials and training videos.

2. Develop process-documentation manuals.

Process documentation outlines the exact steps that need to be taken to complete a task from start to finish. This document also includes screenshots and links to associated files. Not only does process documentation help preserve the company knowledge, but it can also be a useful tool for training.

Employees can be tasked with creating process documentation for their key job responsibilities and then assembling these processes into a comprehensive digital manual. This manual should be reviewed and updated annually, or as new processes are implemented.

3. Cross-train.

Like process documentation, cross-training helps protect companies against disruption of services and knowledge leak. When employees learn the skills needed to perform an additional job function successfully, they become an incredible asset. In addition to being able to step in and provide coverage for their coworkers' planned and unplanned absences, they can also be called upon to provide additional support during peak times.

Not only does cross-training benefit the company, it can benefit the employees as well. The employees learn new skills and gain a better understanding of other aspects of the organization. Cross-training is made easier when employees have access to the process documentation mentioned earlier. Depending on the type of skills being taught, trainers may need to have the ability to share their computer screen.

4. Communicate with customers.

If a business has slowed, it's possible their customers are running at a slower pace as well. This could be a great opportunity for employees to call the clients to let them know how much their business is valued. Another option is to survey employees via phone calls or anonymous online surveys.

5. Problem–solve.

Front-line employees have a unique perspective that may be often overlooked. Now could be an ideal time to gather valuable input from employees on how to improve processes. What problems are they observing? Do they have ideas for cost savings, potential new customers, or untapped business opportunities? These same employees can be assigned to teams and tasked to develop potential solutions or action steps based on the shared feedback.

Managing Your Team After A Pandemic

Being a manager during a stressful event such as a pandemic may be a new experience for you. Learning to adapt to changes in your work environment and workload, as well as your employees, is important. And, once the dust settles, a new normal will start to present itself. This new normalcy can create emotions you have never recognized or addressed before in your staff. When going back into the work environment, each employee will handle the transition differently.

Address changes in behavior. As a manager, you are responsible for your employees' ability to fully engage with their work. Returning to the workplace following the pandemic may present employees with a unique emotional barrier—fear of being exposed to the virus in the workplace. Some employees will share this fear with you up front; others may not. So, it is important to pay attention to changes in your employees' behaviors to recognize how they may be feeling, and address that in a constructive way. Behavioral changes—such as an employee being late, missing meetings or deadlines, avoiding new tasks or responsibilities, or disrupting the team with a short temper or impatient emails—can all be indications of emotional unease or fear related to recent events. It's important to follow up with employees with your observations about their behavior and ask what's going on, explain how their behavior is affecting the team, and ask how you can help.

Keep communication open. When returning to work, remember to keep the lines of communication open to all of your employees. Let them know they can come to you about anything impacting their engagement with work. Each employee may communicate differently. Some individuals are hesitant to proactively engage in communication with management. Take the time to check in with all of your employees—even those who appear to be handling things well. Even if they are perfectly fine now, your openness and support now will encourage them in the future.

Listen and share. Allow your staff to express their feelings to you and listen. Simply by listening, you can help ease fear or other emotions they are facing. In addition, sharing your own experiences related to fear might be helpful to your employee. Knowing that a person in a leadership role is going through or has gone through similar feelings might help some staff feel better about the situation.

Compromise and accommodate. Your employees are your business' greatest asset. If you notice changes in an employee or they confide in you that they have reservations about returning to the office, do your best to make a supportive plan. For example, if they ask to work from home for a week longer or they request to work in a space separate from other staff to ease their fears, set some boundaries and accommodate these requests. If the reality of your business means that you simply can't make the specific accommodation your employee requests, explain that honestly and share whatever options you can.

Create an opportunity. This pandemic has provided a moment to stop and reevaluate company values and practices. The workplace behaviors that you likely shared during the pandemic of team solidarity, compromise, efficiency, creativity, and compassion, do not need to disappear when everyone returns to the workplace. These can elevate your workplace and your company's bottom line. A successful return to work plan includes figuring out how to support and integrate these behaviors into your company's culture and goals going forward.

Source: Franco, F. & Gregg-Meeker, C. (2020, April 20). Managing your team after COVID-19 (A. Gaddis, Ed.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

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. How can supervisors support isolated workers who are now telecommuting? My telecommuting workers have doubled, and I am wondering what sort of problems these employees will be experiencing.

A. Supporting employees during the national response to the coronavirus requires establishing a mutually agreeable communication plan with appropriate frequency that can help telecommuters. Several media reports have discussed how over 70% of employees have experienced sleep disturbances because of the pandemic, but research on employee isolation shows it alone can also negatively affect sleep. Research has shown that family conflicts also affect the performance of telecommuters. Depression is an ailment shown to be associated with working in isolation. Ironically, research has also shown isolated employees are more susceptible to viruses because their immune systems become weaker. Presenteeism can also be a larger problem for telecommuters because they are concerned what others think, and fear losing a desired telecommuting position if they can't work. Supervisors have the ability to listen, be supportive, and mitigate some of these factors, but it is also obvious that the EAP can be more important than ever. Sources: "The Psychological Impact of Teleworking: Stress, Emotions, and Health"; Mann and Holdsworth (ScienceAlert, Feb 3 2019)

Q. I have suggested on many occasions that my employee visit the EAP because of his grumpy communication style. Can I make a formal referral to the EAP for this sort of annoying problem? I have no complaints about quality of work.

A. Generally, job performance is an umbrella term that includes attendance and tardiness, availability to work, conduct, behavior, attitude, quality of work, and quantity of work performed. This scope covers just about anything that can be measured within an employee's essential functions. If you can describe and document this undesirable attitude and its negative impact on others and productivity, then you have what's needed to push for change. Consult with the EAP. The problem you describe is likely part of a long-term pattern, one that many people have adapted to, and therefore resistance to change will be great. Rather than just speak with your employee in an attempt to persuade, use a well-written corrective memo that describes the problem, its impact, and attempts by you to encourage change; referral to the EAP; what you would like to see changed; and how these changes must happen without delay. Get support from your manager because an end-run to the boss is not unusual when quality of work is not an issue.

Q. What are the more common reasons employees quit attending the EAP after being formally referred by supervisors for a performance problem?

A. Common reasons employees stop visiting the EAP or do not participate in its recommendations include these: 1) The employee believes the personal problem can be resolved without following the EAP's recommendations; 2) The employee does not believe the organization will issue a disciplinary action for future performance problems if the personal problem remains unresolved; 3) The employee finds an alternative treatment option (usually one that is less directive and effective); 4) The employee has other employment options (or income sources) that decrease motivation and urgency to follow through with EAP recommendations; 5) The employee believes the supervisor referral is punitive, not supported by tangible performance problems, and therefore unnecessary. EA professionals are skilled at intervening and overcoming most of these motivational hurdles, but supervisor referrals that produce the most motivated employees are usually well planned. This requires good communication established in advance with the EAP.