



# THE SUPERVISOR/HR NEWSLETTER

Public Employee Benefits Alliance

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MAR.  
2021

## MARCH ONLINE SEMINAR

### *Planning for Success*

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## UPCOMING WEBINARS

### 2021 Pandemic Support Webinar Series

#### *How to Maximize Productivity and Job Satisfaction While Working Remotely*

This timely session will review the benefits and challenges of working from home, and provide several tips and strategies that can help remote workers to maximize productivity and job satisfaction. Areas to be discussed include identifying the best workspace, planning/structuring your day, self-discipline, managing distractions, and meeting your personal/social needs.

Date/Time: April 5, 2021, 1:00-2:00 PM CT

REGISTER NOW 

### 2021 Supervisor Excellence Webinar Series

#### *How to Help Your Staff Cope with Change and Uncertainty*

As the pandemic continues, many individuals are facing significant stress, changing circumstances, and uncertainty. This important session will provide supervisors and managers with several practical strategies for helping their employees to better manage stress, adjust to changes, and cope with an uncertain future.

Date/Time: May 10, 2021 1:00-2:00 PM CT

REGISTER NOW 

# Four Steps for Addressing Sensitive Topics with Employees

## How do you address sensitive topics with employees?

Janet attended an Ivy League college and earned her Master in Business Administration (MBA). As a new manager, however, she found herself facing an issue that had never been covered in her classes. Several members of her team were complaining about a coworker's body odor, and Janet needed to intervene.

Managers will tell you that addressing sensitive issues with employees is a common job function, albeit not one typically included in a job description. Other potentially difficult conversations involve dress code violations, disheveled appearance, poor grammar, unclean workspace, or food odors, just to name a few.

While avoiding the topic may be more comfortable for the manager, it can hurt overall morale and potentially lead to staff turnover. Therefore, it's important for managers to learn how to have difficult conversations with employees in emotionally healthy ways. Below are four suggested steps to help managers prepare.

### Step One: Think beyond the presenting problem.

First, a manager should consider whether the issue could be a symptom of a larger problem. Questions to ask include the following:

- Is the employee missing work more frequently or arriving late?
- Has performance declined?
- Are there signs of a low mood?
- Has the employee experienced a major life change?

If the answer is yes to any of the above, the manager should recognize that the employee may be struggling with an emotional health issue. In this scenario, a manager may want to first discuss the situation with the human resources (HR) representative before addressing it with the employee.

### Step Two: Prepare for action.

It's important that the manager thinks through exactly what needs to be communicated to the employee and stick to those points. This should include how the behavior is impacting others, the desired behavior, and the consequences if the behavior does not change.

Keeping in mind that body language and tone of voice are an important part of the communication triangle, the manager should also consider how to best communicate empathy and respect during the encounter.

Practicing the conversation ahead of time with a member of HR or a professional mentor is recommended if the manager feels anxious. Some employers provide access to manager support programs, where counselors can guide managers through challenging situations. If this resource is available, it can be very helpful.

### Step Three: Meet with the employee.

Sensitive conversations with employees should always take place in a private setting, although it is acceptable in some situations to involve an HR representative or an additional manager. It is best to be straight forward, focusing on the key points developed in step two.

The employee should be given an opportunity to share relevant feedback and offer potential solutions to the problem. Once the manager has listened to the feedback, the next steps can be discussed. This may involve providing resources to help the employee make the desired change. By the end of the conversation, the employee should have a clear understanding of

- What behavior needs to change and why
- The new behavior that is expected
- Resources available (if any) to assist the employee in meeting expectations
- Timeline for meeting expectations
- Consequences of not meeting expectations
- Date and time for a follow-up

It is suggested that managers document their conversations, even if it is not required by their HR departments.

#### **Step Four: Have a follow-up conversation.**

During the follow-up meeting, the manager should note to what degree the expectations are being met. If the employee has been successful in adopting the new behavior, it's important to recognize that accomplishment and convey appreciation. On the other hand, if the change is sporadic or nonexistent, then ongoing actions as identified in the initial meeting are required.

It is understandable that managers may be reluctant to discuss difficult topics with their employees. It can be awkward for both the manager and the employee. However, handling the situation skillfully and with sensitivity not only benefits the department, but it is also in the employee's best interest as well.

*Note: This article is for information purposes only. Managers should consult their HR department for specific instructions and policies related to employee discipline.*

*Source: Workplace Options. (2020). Four steps for addressing sensitive topics with employees. Retrieved January 21, 2021, from <https://www.workplaceoptions.com>*

## Understanding Diversity

### **Basics**

"A diverse work force is a reality. Step up to it, not away from it."

—Former Xerox CEO David Kearns

Company leaders across the nation are reconsidering the composition of their work force in terms of race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation and disability. But why? Because the face of the American work force is changing rapidly, promoting diversity benefits the bottom line.

The applicant pool differs radically from that of 30 years ago, but will look even more different 30 years from now. Right now, "the majority of the people coming into the work force—75 percent of new entrants—are either racial/ethnic minorities or women," according to Derald Wing Sue, psychology professor at California School of Professional Psychology and California State University at Hayward.

Potential benefits of hiring more diverse employees include

- Reducing turnover and absenteeism
- Increasing job performance and satisfaction
- Creating a bridge to a diverse marketplace
- Developing a richer mix of ideas, solutions and resources

A more varied group of employees presents a different set of challenges for managers, including

- Using sensitivity in the workplace (office décor and holiday celebrations, for example, which may be as simple as not placing a Christmas tree in the lobby)
- Counseling employees who may be uncomfortable with coworkers' differences
- Recognizing new and untapped skills
- Increasing employee sensitivity to diversity issues

## Key Tips

### Key Tip 1

Workforce diversity bridges the gap between the workplace and the marketplace. For instance, your employees may tell their friends about their workplace and its positive atmosphere regarding diversity. Your employees' positive opinions regarding the organization will likely influence potential customers. At work, diverse perspectives help your company better understand increasingly diverse markets.

### Key Tip 2

A diverse work force has strengths you may not know about. For example, disabled employees, as a group, have excellent attendance records. Older employees might require less training than younger employees. And groups with a broad range of experiences often generate rich ideas and solutions.

### Key Tip 3

While diversity in the work force makes good business sense, not everyone may be happy about it. Inevitably, some of your employees might feel threatened by changes in the organization's composition. It's not up to you, as a manager, to dictate how anyone should feel about diversity initiatives. But if the unhappiness affects business, you're within your rights to speak with employees about how their behavior affects the organization.

### Key Tip 4

Growing numbers of major American corporations have committed to understanding and promoting diversity. Chase, Toyota, and American Express are a few of the large organizations that have launched such programs.

### Key Tip 5

Organizational progress toward diversity is measurable. Although it's difficult to show a direct correlation between a diverse organization and its financial well-being, you can assess changes in individual behavior, organizational performance and stockholders' attitudes. Gauges to be aware of include

- Percentage of employment offers accepted
- Employee and customer feedback
- Productivity
- Absenteeism
- Information from exit interviews
- Litigation expenses

*Source: Workplace Options. (Reviewed 2021). Understanding diversity. Raleigh, NC: Author.*

# 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. Periodically, I see articles about empathy and supervisors. The dictionary defines empathy as the “ability to understand and share the feelings of another.” Why is this so important?*

A. Empathy in the workplace has wide application for supervisors. A simple example would be recognizing an employee is experiencing grief and offering a supportive response. A complex example would be listening to an employee’s complaints but suspending your judgment and not labeling the worker as a malcontent, but instead focusing on understanding, discovering a solution, and implementing it to benefit others. When you spend time observing behaviors of employees and engaging with them, you begin to identify their feeling states. Over time, you develop a skill called “empathic reach” or “accurate empathy.” You’re not a mind reader, but you are able to detect with higher frequency and accuracy, issues and concerns affecting your employees. You are also perceived by employees as a safe person to approach with problems and concerns. For these reasons, empathic supervisors build strong loyalty among their employees.

*Q. I don’t visually observe my employees since many of them are now working remotely. I would like to keep an eye open for signs of stress, but how is this done without seeing attendance, interpersonal behaviors, or attitude problems?*

A. Several research studies that track employee mental health have shown that the pandemic has taken its toll. What’s tricky is helping managers support the mental health of employees without stepping into a diagnostic role. Increasing communication with workers is a good idea because this can naturally lead to more discovery about how your employees are doing generally. Another tip is to be appropriately open about, or at least acknowledge your own feelings of, stress during this COVID-19 era. This “disclosure begets disclosure” idea can prompt your employees to share their own stress issues. You can then mention or encourage use of the EAP. Note that when an employee shares something personal with you as a manager, the degree to which they demonstrate anxiety or concern is usually minimized. Understanding this can keep you from also minimizing the importance of an issue that could urgently need EAP help. (Research study: [www.qualtrics.com/blog/confronting-mental-health](http://www.qualtrics.com/blog/confronting-mental-health))

*Q. I am frustrated with my employee because I have suggested he get help at the EAP for whatever is going on in his life to resolve his attendance issues. Despite my dozen or so recommendations, he hasn’t gone. So, it’s time for me to take disciplinary action, right?*

A. You have probably noticed that your employee makes short-lived successful attempts at coming in on time after your discussions and pleading. These short-lived improvements usually indicate attempts by the worker to control symptoms of whatever is contributing to tardiness. Consider coordinating with your human resources advisor to discuss offering the employee a firm choice between accepting an EAP referral based on the attendance issues or accepting the appropriate disciplinary measure. The tone of this discussion should be one of concern and support, reinforcing what you see as the value of this worker, and how you are making an accommodation to assist him in correcting the attendance issue. This affirming attitude rather than a punitive one, along with the leverage afforded by the disciplinary action, will create strong urgency to accept the referral.

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