



# THE SUPERVISOR/HR NEWSLETTER

Public Employee Benefits Alliance

HELPFUL RESOURCES FROM YOUR  
EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

JUNE  
2021

## JUNE ONLINE SEMINAR

*Building Healthy and  
Happy Relationships*

Identify the ways to build and maintain healthy relationships with those around you, with a focus on the importance of boundary setting.

Available on-demand starting  
June 15th at  
[www.deeroakseap.com](http://www.deeroakseap.com)

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## UPCOMING WEBINARS

### 2021 Pandemic Support Webinar Series

*How to Deal with Anxiety in the Midst of Stressful Circumstances*

This past year, our world has been faced with a series of difficult and stressful circumstances that have left many of us feeling anxious. This timely session will discuss several practical approaches to dealing with anxiety including managing our self-talk, expressing our emotions, and seeking appropriate support from others.

Date/Time: July 12, 2021, 1:00-2:00 PM CT

[REGISTER NOW](#) 

### 2021 Supervisor Excellence Webinar Series

*Helping Your Team Find Work-Life Balance During Stressful Times*

During these difficult times, many employees are experiencing higher levels of stress. This important session will provide supervisors, managers, and HR professionals with practical strategies to help them encourage their employees to live more balanced lifestyles so they can remain healthy and productive.

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

[REGISTER NOW](#) 

# Managing Through COVID-19: Communicate to Build Trust

No matter how good a job your organization's leaders are doing at communicating with employees through the changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, your people also need to hear from you and feel that you are hearing them. When organization-wide announcements are made of changes that affect employees' work, you need to follow those quickly with communications of your own and with calls or meetings at which your team can ask you questions. Your people will want to know what the changes mean for each of them.

Too little communication leaves an information vacuum that people tend to fill with speculation, rumor, and fear. This is a time for extra communication: more frequent, with more detail, and with more opportunities for questions and discussion.

How you handle that communication will be key to whether your people feel comfortable in following the plan and whether they are motivated to give their best work. A big part of their reaction—and how they behave moving forward—will be based on their level of trust in the organization and in you.

How can you build that trust as a manager? By communicating clearly, honestly, and often, and by taking the time to listen to your employees' concerns. If your team members believe that you and the organization care about them as people, that you understand their work and personal needs, they are more likely to follow and give their full energy, focus, and creativity to their work. If, on the other hand, they feel that their needs—especially their health needs and their families' health needs during the pandemic—aren't understood or respected, they may withdraw into feelings of resentment, follow directives only reluctantly, or even consider finding other work.

Here are some ways to communicate and listen to build trust and engagement:

- **Communicate often.** In times of rapid change and disruption, your team needs to hear from you often. Share relevant email and posted updates from the organization as they come to you. Your team may also need more frequent opportunities to discuss issues and plans together.
- **Stay connected with your team.** Consider a schedule that includes regular check-ins for individuals and the team, including those working remotely and those who are in the workplace. Use the check-ins both to communicate casually (one human being to another) and to maintain focus on work objectives. Consider building extra time in meetings for social interactions if the team is no longer together in person. You might even schedule a weekly time just for catching up with each other, with a rule that work discussion is off limits on these calls or video conferences.
- **Ask, don't assume.** Ask about the best times for check-ins and meetings; don't assume what works for you will work for each of your employees. Those with children at home may have new schedule constraints, for example. Ask how employees are doing; don't assume everything is fine. Ask how the technology you are using for meetings is working. Ask whether people understand new directives and priorities. When you ask, pause to give people time to think and respond, then listen carefully to what they say.
- **Frame your communication with positive messages.** Even when delivering tough news, share the facts, then shine a light on the positive and hopeful aspects of the situation:
  - Choose words that inspire confidence and don't amplify fears—while maintaining honesty and openness.
  - Keep yourself and your team focused on the present—the reality of the situation as you know it today, and what you and your team can do to make things better. Model the idea that “today we can do better.”
  - Remind your team to focus on what they control. It's draining and unproductive for people to worry about what they can't control.
  - Encourage a problem-solving approach on your team. Ask for ideas on different ways to get the work done. Explore cross-training opportunities to build more flexibility as to who is able to do needed work at home and in the workplace.

- Demonstrate a calm, thoughtful, open-minded, problem-solving approach yourself.
  - Discuss with your team what you are all learning from the changes you are going through: which new work practices are effective and might be built on for further improvement; what you are learning about each other.
  - Share successes and review accomplishments with your team to keep spirits up.
- **Anticipate questions employees will ask, and be prepared with answers.** If changes are being made to where, when, and how employees are to do their work, your team members are likely to have questions about
    - Safety protocols
    - What training is available on safety protocols and new work practices
    - What steps will be taken if an employee tests positive for COVID-19
    - How decisions are being made about who comes into the workplace and when
    - What to expect when coming back to the workplace for the first time after a period of not working or working from home
    - Whether attendance in the workplace is a request or a requirement, and the consequences of choosing not to come in
    - Whether vaccination is encouraged or required for attendance in the workplace, and the consequences of choosing not to be vaccinated
    - How specific needs will be considered, such as lack of child care or high health risk

Demonstrate your strong and caring leadership by being ready with answers to easily anticipated questions like these. Study your organization's directives, ask questions of your manager and human resources (HR) representative to be clear on where you have leeway to make decisions and be flexible, and be clear in your own mind about how you will apply new work rules and guidelines fairly and with the safety of your people—and their families—as a driving priority.

### **Be compassionate, honest, and open.**

- Show your compassion by being genuine in your communication and by demonstrating that you care about your employees' wellbeing.
- Listen more than you talk so that employees know that they are heard and so that you learn what they are experiencing and thinking. As a sign of active listening, summarize what you are hearing from employees during your discussion and ask for confirmation that you have understood. Ask open-ended questions to get people talking, and make an effort to draw out team members who are holding back.
- Share what you know, even if it's only partial information. In a rapidly changing situation like a pandemic, even experts don't have all the answers yet. Your organization's leaders and you will need to make decisions based on the information you have. The more information your team has, the more confident they will feel in moving forward.
- Be clear about your expectations. Goals and work practices may have changed dramatically. Make sure employees understand what you want from them and how you expect them to work together.
- Avoid jargon. Employees have an extra need now for meaningful communication and will not respond well to catch phrases that don't address their concerns.
- Don't be afraid to admit you don't know the answer to a question. When that happens, say that you don't know, and commit to following up. In some cases, that might be by finding the answer from someone else in your organization. In other cases, it might be by finding out where the employee can get the answer.
- Build a culture of trust on your team by making it a safe place to express emotions and process reactions to changes and new information together.

Model emotional maturity. Employees look to their manager as a role model for how to react to changes at work or in crisis situations. If you appear anxious, they will feel and echo that anxiety. The most effective approach is to acknowledge when a situation is difficult and may cause stress, but show confidence that it can be handled and overcome. This mature attitude from a leader can help employees meet challenges successfully.

*Morgan, H. (Revised 2021, April). Step 3: Communicate to build trust. In Leading teams in a COVID-19 world: A guide for managers (pp. 6–9). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.*

## Celebrating Diversity at Work: Pro-Diversity Management

### **Lead the way.**

From the lowest rung to the highest, everyone can be a model for good behavior. But managers set the tone for the entire department. Watch your own behavior and the language you use. It's okay to express an interest in someone's cultural background, but tread carefully. Too many questions may be interpreted as rude and prying. And be discreet if a worker asks for a special accommodation for religious or cultural reasons.

### **Be fair to all.**

Expect the same quality and standard of work from all of your employees. Nothing increases tensions more than unfairness or even the appearance of inequity. Distribute the workload equitably, be evenhanded with criticism, and praise all who deserve it.

### **Cultivate sensitivity.**

Ban racial and sexual jokes. Misguided attempts at humor can build resentment, harm work relationships, and open the door to discrimination and harassment lawsuits.

Be sensitive at holiday time. A diverse workforce means that employees don't celebrate the same events. Keep that in mind when you're planning holiday activities.

### **Benefit from diversity.**

People from different backgrounds often have unique perspectives. Varying viewpoints can improve problem-solving strategies, increase creativity, and bolster communication. As a manager, you can help elicit these perspectives in a cooperative manner.

*Source: Workplace Options. (Reviewed 2017). Celebrating diversity at work: Pro-diversity management. 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. When I make a formal referral to the EAP, should I try to reduce the tension associated with constructive confrontation by having the meeting outside of my office? Would the employee's office be better, or perhaps a quiet spot in a more neutral area?*

A. It is important to recognize that having one's work praised and/or one's lack of satisfactory performance corrected is a normal, healthy, and essential part of managing worker productivity. These activities should not be viewed as regrettable or disadvantageous. Referring employees to the EAP is likewise a complementary step in this process, periodically, and one designed to help workers address personal problems that may be preventing change. None of this is to say that meetings to correct performance can't be successfully held in other locations. Be aware that your concern about having the most accommodating location, and that this element is essential to the meeting's success, may be motivated by your fear of conflict along with your desire for acceptance. It's great that you are willing to be accommodating, but remember it is the employee's responsibility to change, no matter where the meeting is held.

*Q. Can I ask the EAP to give me an opinion on the likely impact of a certain type of disciplinary action on an employee's psychology? My concern is that the employee might "go off" and become violent.*

A. You can meet with the EAP concerning any matter that you view as a personal problem. This includes worry or anxiety you experience concerning a decision to dispense a disciplinary action. It would be inappropriate however to ask the EAP to render a clinical judgment regarding the psychological or behavioral effects of such an action on a specific employee. You can consult with a mental health professional or medical doctor outside your organization, of course, or consult with another department in your organization unaligned with the EAP. Rendering psychological opinions at the very least requires discussing an employee's psychological makeup. This would violate confidentiality and be beyond the scope of a signed consent, which provides for very limited information, none of it clinical.

*Q. I have a superstar employee. He earns outstanding performance evaluations yearly. My concern is his gambling. After hours, he reportedly plays poker. I've heard that there is a lot of domestic conflict as well. Is it improper for me to comment, inquire, intervene, or involve myself in this situation?*

A. Employees who perform well certainly can have serious personal problems, and symptoms may never be visible or demonstrated at work. A rumor or secondhand information does not justify making an inquiry into your employee's personal life unless the issue appears to be life threatening. So, you are not behaving irresponsibly by remaining focused only on performance. Remember, you know about this employee's problems only because of hearsay. Other employees could have personal problems that are even worse. Frequently remind employees about the EAP. Remind employees about it during review periods, after a crisis, and by using reminders in workplace wellness literature. Remember also that this employee's personal problems may not have been accurately portrayed by the source, which is not unusual for secondhand information.

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