Q. How can supervisors help employees maintain a positive mental attitude?

A. If you have a good working relationship with your employees, you can play a constructive role in influencing their positive mental attitude by blending positivity into your supervision style. Here are some ideas: 1) When coaching, remind employees of their capacity to achieve so they “buy in” to their own potential. 2) Encourage employees to embrace personal growth opportunities within the organization and the community. 3) Encourage employees to take chances and think big when it comes to pursuing their goals. 4) When crises occur, model calmness, coolness, and a level-headed response. 5) Encourage employees to develop their passions and find the professional niche that matches their talents and values. 6) Model hope and optimism when the going gets tough. 7) Interrupt negative self-talk and reassure your employees that they have what it takes to win, which will reduce their self-doubt. 8) Encourage employees to “smell the roses” and pursue work-life balance.

Q. I like the concept of “management by wandering around.” I read about it in a textbook, but I think employees don’t like a supervisor who sneaks around in the workplace. Should I let employees know when I am coming? I think anything less will undermine trust?

A. Management by wandering around (MBWA) is a supervision technique that is designed to be random or unpredictable. The idea is to better gauge work processes, issues, and problems by showing up unexpectedly. You should also add catching people doing something “right” to this list! No one truly knows where the idea originated, but scheduling visits would undermine its purpose. Letting employees know you involve yourself in this practice, however, would prepare them to be less annoyed when you show up unannounced. Certainly there are employees who do not like surprise visits from wandering management, but what they would resent more is you not caring at all. To make this practice more effective and less intrusive, create a tradition of doing it regularly, and engage with employees along the way by listening to their complaints, ideas, and recommendations for improving productivity. Nearly all employees have some. They’ll feel heard and you and your employees will both see value in the practice of management by wandering around.

Q. My employee has been with our company for a long time. He refuses many assigned duties as well as some that are part of the job description. I don’t think anyone in management is willing to consider termination. They want me to “fix” the problem, but I have no leverage. Now what?

A. Simply put, it appears as though you are unable to direct the employee’s work. If true, then you have lost control of the employment relationship. Troubled employees who have gained this sort of leverage over their employers create a lot of risk. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon. Entitlement thinking may lead to bossing coworkers, bullying fellow employees, breaking work rules, end-running managers, and using company property for personal business. Fear of the employee’s reaction to confrontation and adapting to avoid it ultimately created this personnel issue. Start by making a formal referral to the EAP. Document the poor cooperation, work refusal, etc. Regardless of whether the employee accepts a referral, meet and consult with the EAP; your manager should also be involved in this meeting. Discuss a concrete action plan. In matters of this type, management teams that focus on a solution usually decide to draw a line and insist on change. The good part is that most are pleasantly surprised at how easily the employee turns around!
Questions & Answers

Q. Can you give me a checklist for counseling employees about their performance to reduce the likelihood that I will leave something out, allowing the employee to manipulate me by saying some element of our discussion was omitted?

A. Try the following checklist: First, ask the employee how things are going, and whether he or she is having any difficulty with assignments. You'll be surprised at the self-awareness. Next, discuss your concern, and any discrepancy between what you've observed and the employee's self-assessment. Then, tell the employee exactly what expected outcome or result must be achieved. Discuss specific examples of the performance issue in question and how it can be corrected. Before ending the meeting, ask your employee whether he or she understands what needs to be accomplished. Failure to make this clarification will lead to a claim that confusion existed at the end of your meeting. Note: Prior to your meeting, consider your employee's essential duties and performance standards. Are they reasonable? Clarify and affirm that expectations are reasonable, and advocate or make changes, as needed. Also, don’t forget to make the EAP a key part of your supervisor’s toolbox.

Q. How are employees negatively affected by my not dealing with an underperforming employee? Over the years, I’ve held off dealing with some substandard performers, often “longtimers” with nonproductive work habits. I backed off because others seemed to pick up the slack?

A. It’s stressful confronting employees and dealing with poor performers, especially longtime employees who may suddenly question why after so many years you are now “picking” on them. However, not doing so will create larger problems. When you send a nonverbal message to other workers that your expectations are not very high, outstanding workers who typically perform well with little supervision can succumb to a nonverbal message that you will accept mediocrity. As a result, they may not perform at their peak level because you apparently don’t care. Your best workers may have high standards or may work for anticipated future rewards, but they naturally respond to the standards and expectations that the organization sets. You undermine this productivity dynamic by letting some workers just get by. Not expecting the best of your employees will engender a work unit characterized by malaise and morale problems. Consult with the EAP to help you plan an effective approach.

Q. I am a new boss and would like my employees to consider me a good one. I am not charismatic, but what can I do? How can I act to inspire and motivate them to believe in me and follow me as a leader?

A. Charismatic leaders typically demonstrate strong beliefs and are passionate about work goals. They imagine magnificent outcomes that their peers often consider unattainable. However, their genuineness and passion inspire others. This level of enthusiasm is infectious, creates engaged workers, and contributes to a positive work unit. This is what employees want. They want to be excited, and they want leadership demonstrated. You can adopt this leadership style without charisma. Commit yourself to your role and aim high. Seek input from outside resources, mentors, and personal sources of inspiration so that you can pass this energy on to your employees. This is crucial. If you remain a manager who is open-minded, teachable, and hungry to learn, and you are excited to share that energy with others, then you’ll have a hard-working, dedicated team that will talk about you in positive terms for years to come.

APS Healthcare’s Employee Assistance Program. The EAP program through APS Healthcare assists organizations and their workforce in managing the personal challenges that impact employee well-being, performance and effectiveness. APS’ life management consultants employ a comprehensive approach that identifies issues impacting the employee and assists them in developing meaningful solutions.

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