

# SOLUTIONS

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**Question:** There is much pessimism in the news regarding how employees feel about their jobs and their employers. Even I feel it. I am only one supervisor, but what can I do to promote a positive attitude at work?

**Answer:** Although increasing work and economic stress, along with loss of loyalty to the employer, is often reported, the news is not all bad. Research shows that a majority of employees do feel engaged in their work, although more so in smaller companies. This sentiment may result from feeling that they have more control over their work. So, the more you can help employees feel a sense of ownership of their work, the better they may feel about their jobs. Many companies wonder what managers or supervisors can do to improve employees' attitudes. Less frequently asked is what they can stop doing. A Harris Interactive poll in late 2004 showed that only 63 percent of supervisors and managers cared about the fate of their employer. Unless a supervisor cares about the employer, it will be difficult to influence morale in subordinates. Examine your speech and actions to determine whether you periodically demonstrate an unhelpful attitude that contributes to the problem you are trying to solve. If you are exhibiting a continuous negative attitude, you cannot expect your employees to have a positive attitude at work. Contact your EAP for ideas about creating and maintaining a positive work environment.

**Question:** I have to confess, I have not done a performance appraisal with my employees in a couple of years. I have had no complaints, and employees are doing well. With so much to do, I just keep postponing it. I know I should do it, but I don't. What am I risking?

**Answer:** Most supervisors know that performance appraisals are a good thing for employees and the company, but most aren't aware of important and powerful secondary effects of doing performance appraisals. One is the ability to defuse ticking time bombs. Many employees will bring personal complaints to the performance appraisal table. You'll learn things you may never otherwise discover. Conflicts, unfairness, resource deficiencies, discriminatory problems, harassment, reports of theft and existing safety risks all may show up at the performance appraisal discussion. Beyond these practical matters, performance appraisals empower employees and are a good way to bond with them. Performance appraisals help create loyalty and establish direction, help employees feel like they have goals and a stake in outcome and help them feel in control of their lives. Experience shows that employees feel ignored and hurt if they don't get appraisals—even if they don't anticipate a good one!



**Question:** Another supervisor told me that one of my best employees frequently bullies coworkers when I'm not around. My employee is so gentle I find it hard to believe he's a bully. Should I investigate or ignore this?

**Answer:** Ignoring this situation poses risks. If your employee engages in bullying behavior, it can harm morale and undermine team performance. Even worse, other employees may lose faith in your leadership if they think you've been duped into believing that this individual is gentle. This can breed cynicism and weaken your authority. Most supervisors eventually learn that when it comes to employees, appearances can deceive. A seemingly kind, thoughtful worker can come across as a bully to others. Investigate the matter by meeting privately with the employee—and then his coworkers—to gather information. Also, observe how this person interacts with his colleagues and look for evidence of intimidation or discord. You may want to visit the EAP to learn about the nature of bullying in the workplace and how to manage it.

**Question:** I want employees to see the EAP as an ongoing resource even if they don't have serious problems. What's the best way to pitch it as a sounding board that everyone can use?

**Answer:** At every opportunity, present the EAP as a valuable benefit for all employees for many reasons. Emphasize the positive role it plays in helping people enhance their lives—from gaining a better work-life balance, to improving personal efficiency, to assisting with career advancement. When employees view the EAP as a source of information, insight and support, they will use it even if they never need to fight battles that threaten their well-being. Given the growing

interest in health and wellness, the EAP can be presented as a partner in helping people reduce stress and make smart personal care choices. To persuade employees to seek out the EAP, ask questions that guide their decision making such as “Do you think you'd find it beneficial to get input from a caring, knowledgeable source?” This may be more encouraging than making “should” statements such as, “I think you should contact the EAP.”

**Question:** The past few years have been difficult between me and my employee. The relationship is at an all-time low. He and I snap at each other, our voice tones are inappropriate, we do not exchange civilities and, frankly, I will fire him the next wrong move he makes. Any advice?

**Answer:** Talk to your EAP fast. The conflict between you and your employee is a risk issue for your organization, and it is a stressor that you must manage better. Unresolved and festering anger can be a hair trigger for violence, lawsuits, theft, property damage and unpredictable productivity problems. Many supervisors treat ongoing mutual resentment between themselves and employees they supervise as personal matters, but in fact they pose risks for the organization. Between you and the EAP professional, decide on a course of action that will improve the relationship. You may feel it's too late, but if you are willing to try, your employee may also cooperate. A meeting with the EAP will likely be attractive to your employee so he can vent and explain his side of the story. You may notice an immediate improvement in the interaction between you and your employee after these initial steps. However, this won't last long if you don't pursue the opportunity to resolve your differences with the help of the EAP.

**Question:** What is the key issue in leadership often overlooked by supervisors that can undermine their attempt to achieve workplace goals and build a cohesive team?

**Answer:** A key leadership skill is identifying the skills and talents of employees and motivating them to use those skills in the pursuit of organizational goals. Effective leaders invest in developing constructive working relationships with their employees, and they help them apply their talents in the pursuit of goals. Behaviors that demonstrate effective leadership skills are both learned and naturally part of some supervisors' personalities, but the investment by the leader in authentically meeting the needs of the team is what promotes loyalty and motivates followers (employees). The payoff for effective leadership is acquiring influence. Many supervisors reverse this process or miss part of it in their pursuit of becoming a leader. They focus more, or too much on, achieving goals, while neglecting the needs of employees on whom they rely. Leaders will not generate loyalty without also developing meaningful relationships with the employees they supervise.

**Question:** In supervisor training, we were strongly warned not to ask employees personal questions or to discuss employees' personal problems. I find this a difficult task because it makes me appear cold. Can you discuss this a little more?

**Answer:** Discussing an employee's personal problems usually results in a temporary cessation of job performance problems that may be caused by the employee's personal issues. After such

discussions, there is often mutual satisfaction between the supervisor and the employee. The employee feels gratified and re-energized to exercise greater control of his or her personal problem and its symptoms, and the supervisor feels he or she successfully counseled the employee to change his or her behavior. These discussions are seductive, but hazardous, because they protract the performance problems, lead to crisis and can serve to perpetuate underlying chronic problems. Often these discussions are motivated by the supervisor's natural desire to avoid disciplining an employee or participating in constructive confrontation. Consider consulting with the EAP to better understand your supervisory role and effective integration of the EAP in supervision.

**Question:** Our organization will lose nearly 15 percent of its employees in a planned downsizing this year. Should I anticipate that productivity will be negatively affected, and if so, is there anything I can do about it? Will employees simply not care about productivity this year?

**Answer:** Anger and anxiety will play powerful roles and may affect some employees' productivity as they seek to cope with the uncertainty of downsizing. Many supervisors assume that all employees will suffer a lack of productivity when downsizing looms and anxiety grows, but this is not necessarily the case. Productivity may increase for some employees. These will tend to be employees who have a high level of insecurity about their positions, but who also have a high need to work. In other words, those who can afford to lose their jobs the least may demonstrate more productivity than usual. On the other hand, downsizing anxiety may adversely affect the



productivity of employees who have a low need to work. Offering support and effectively planning communication as downsizing is implemented is important to both groups, regardless of anticipated productivity levels, because the personal reaction of each employee cannot be predicted or generalized to a larger group.

***Question:*** I have done very well in my career, so they keep moving me up the ladder. I am happy about it, but I can't seem to relax and accept my success. Self-doubt still creeps in, and I am feeling more fear because more is expected of me, and the stakes are higher. How can I relax?

***Answer:*** It is easy to fall victim to the stresses associated with success. When you earn promotions, gain responsibility and wield more authority, your inner voice can begin to work against you. You can feel like an impostor who does not deserve such

success, and your anxiety can translate into an ongoing sense that others will discover that you are ill-equipped for your role. Self-doubt can even get to the point where you are rereading positive written comments on old performance evaluations. Challenge the inner voices and scrutinize the validity of your fears. Acknowledge how they can undermine your life so that you can muster the will to overcome them. The key is to eliminate defeatist self-talk by changing the wording. If your inner voice says, "I have no idea what I'm doing," replaced that with, "I'm learning more every day." If it says, "People think I don't deserve to have this job," replace that with, "I am earning their respect." Don't hesitate to contact the EAP for support in understanding your fears and accepting your success.

To speak with an EAP professional,  
please call: **800.765.0770**

