



FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

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SUPERVISOR EMPATHY

Q. Periodically, I see articles about empathy and supervisors. All of us know what empathy means. The dictionary defines empathy as the “ability to understand and share the feelings of another.” Frankly, I don’t know any supervisor or other person who can’t do this, so 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 over time, with high frequency and accuracy, which issues and concerns are affecting your employees. You are also perceived as a safe person to approach with problems and concerns.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER MENTAL HEALTH

Q. I heard from a friend that construction workers have a high rate of suicide. Is this true? What does the literature say? I work in this industry, but haven’t been aware of this before.

A. The construction and extraction industries (mining, excavation, etc.) have the second-highest rate of suicide according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The rate is about 54 workers per 100,000 employees. Several factors are associated with this statistic: the highest rate of heavy drinking of any group, unsteady employment, sleep disruption, chronic pain-driven opioid use and addiction, work pressures, a male-dominated occupation with stigma associated with mental health problems and asking for help, poor work conditions, low pay, stress, depression, and social isolation. As a supervisor in construction trades, have frequent contact with your workers so you can identify performance issues including conflicts and quality of work or attendance problems, discourage bullying, resolve conflicts, and keep the Assistance Program well-promoted as a go-to resource for employees. Stress confidentiality always when speaking about the Assistance Program.

Source: On Google, search “samhsa report 1959 pdf”]

A COMPANY
NEWSLETTER

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IDENTIFYING STRESS REMOTELY

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. Be cautious about what you read online. Increasing communication 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 Assistance Program. 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 Assistance Program help.

Source: www.qualtrics.com/blog/confronting-mental-health



CAN THE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM OVERRIDE EMPLOYER RULES?

Q. I referred an employee to the Assistance Program (AP), and he phoned the next day to say he was taking a two-week vacation recommended by a therapist to whom he was referred. Would the AP override our work rules to permit time off? I can't afford to have him out.

A. A signed consent for the release of confidential information at the AP typically allows communication with management regarding recommendations from medical professionals that affect an employee's work schedule. That does not appear to be the case here. Note that APs operate within a functional framework called the "AP core technology," and the application of this framework underscores noninterference with management policies and work rules. Your employee should follow guidelines established for managing time off. A community mental health professional's recommendation to take a vacation does not equate to treatment for a serious medical condition. Additionally, you have only a phone call to account for this need. Start by consulting with your human resources advisor. Those individuals are the pros who can advise on responding to policy matters. Document carefully, in case attendance and communication issues continue. Phone the AP to see if they can discuss with you what they know about a recommendation for time off.

