

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

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Frontline Supervisor



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■ **Some employees do very well after referral to addiction treatment programs, but some do not. They relapse, struggle, and eventually lose their jobs. Are there “hopeless” cases? How can supervisors intervene earlier or increase the likelihood of success for these employees?**

■ **Many performance problems can be signs and symptoms of a troubled employee, but what about symptoms of personality disorders? Understanding these behaviors better would help supervisors not be manipulated by these employees, correct?**

■ **I am a new supervisor overseeing many blue-collar employees. Supervising this**

Within the recovering community of alcoholics and among treatment professionals, there are many stories of alcoholics who seemed unable to achieve abstinence. In the “Big Book” of Alcoholics Anonymous, authors discuss the success of the 12 steps yet observe how some alcoholics seem almost “constitutionally” incapable of recovery. Most treatment professionals would never use the word “hopeless,” because so many examples of late-stage recoveries exist. Supervisors should not assume any employee is hopeless, but this does not mean ignoring problems. Supervisors, like family members, should learn about enabling and avoid doing it. Enabling plays a key role in the progression of addictive disease and, in turn, resistance to treatment. Like alcoholism, enabling can manifest a chronic and progressive pattern. In the early years of the disease, a supervisor may overlook performance shortcomings. Twenty years later, the same supervisor may be driving his or her employee to work because of a confiscated driver’s license. Loaning money and covering for behavioral problems are also not uncommon.

Learning about behaviors associated with personality disorders would not have practical value in the work setting and could undermine your ability to identify problematic behaviors or job performance issues. It could also enable you to avoid using resources available to you, such as the EAP, to correct problems. Personality disorders are constructs that lump fields of rigid, maladaptive, or deeply engrained behaviors within certain personality types. This process helps clinicians understand human behavior, design treatment plans, and better understand how to help affected persons better adapt to their environment, stress, etc. You may have an employee who is overly concerned about perfection, control, or the order of things, but whether he or she has an obsessive-compulsive personality disorder is not important. The effect of these behaviors on the work situation is what’s important. Avoid the academics and theory of employee problems. You will be more efficient and effective.

Often blue-collar jobs tend to be dirty, dangerous, and/or demanding (heavy physical work). Some white-collar jobs may share these characteristics, but these factors overwhelmingly tilt toward blue-collar occupations.

class of workers is new for me. Is there anything I need to know about working with blue-collar workers as opposed to white-collar workers?

Your first task is to evaluate and overcome any stereotypes, myths, or unhelpful biases toward blue-collar workers that are based upon your life experience. The type of job a person has is often falsely associated with judgments about intelligence, abilities, sophistication, motivation, ambition, education, desire to climb the occupational ladder, social habits, cultural differences, and other factors. These myths can be reinforced by popular culture. They can undermine the ability to build positive relationships with employees that are needed to maximize their productivity. Talk to the EAP and learn more about your supervision style and the work culture if you remain concerned. EAPs often have keen insights on work culture and organizational history that can be helpful to supervisors. Don't ignore difficulty in bonding with your employees. Problems in this area need fast and early attention. Examine a new resource, *Working Class: Challenging Myths About Blue-Collar Labor* by Jeff Torlina (August 2011, Lynne Rienner Publishers).

I am a new supervisor and there are a million things to learn. Can you discuss one critical thing I should keep in mind that most supervisors overlook or don't consider as they take on their new role?

As a new supervisor, a powerful yet often overlooked bit of advice or awareness is to remember that employees are, first and foremost, "supervisor watchers." They pay attention to everything you say and do. They'll track your every move through the work unit, come to understand your moods, remember what you said at the water cooler two years earlier, and more. They will model or behave in ways that are consistent with the way you behave. If you speak badly of the organization, they will too. If you take pride in the work unit and praise the work organization, ditto. This principle applies to interpersonal matters, such as treating others with respect, as well. Never stop learning and you will watch them do the same. Set a good example for your employees to emulate. The most powerful tools supervisors possess are their reputations and conscious use of themselves to influence those they lead.

I am nervous about a disciplinary meeting with my employee. I fear appearing anxious and inexperienced. Can the EAP help?

Being nervous in anticipation of a disciplinary meeting is normal. There is a way to reduce the degree of nervousness, and the EAP can help. Try rehearsing difficult conversations using role-play with the EA professional. (Inquire as to whether HR can assist you, as well, and be sure to follow any steps or procedures they prefer.) Anticipate the kind of questions the employee will ask and practice your answers. A few tips: Keep your responses to the point. Do not wander off topic or place a priority on helping the employee walk away feeling OK and accepting about the disciplinary action. Some nervous supervisors who worry about "bad feelings" are drawn into talking too much or repeating themselves, not giving the employee ample time to respond. Knowing how you are going to structure your meeting will also reduce your nervousness.

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