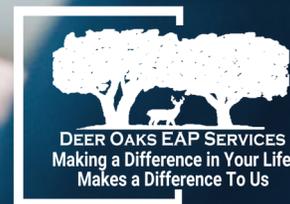


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How to Effectively Supervise a Remote Work Team

Supervisors who are responsible for managing remote workers face several unique challenges. This important session will review the core management and leadership skills necessary to ensure that remote employees are engaged and productive. Areas to be discussed include methods for keeping remote workers connected, the importance of establishing a communications rhythm, and strategies for effectively coaching and managing remote worker performance.

Date/Time: February 22, 2021 1:00-2:00 PM CT

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Responding to Employee Needs Throughout COVID-19

Levels of fear and anxiety related to COVID-19 remain high around the world, and it is likely to be affecting members of your team. Overt signs of emotional distress, like crying or expressing hopelessness, are easy to spot. However, managers should also be familiar with the less obvious signs as well, which can include the following:

- Attendance problems
- Errors and inconsistent work quality
- Reduced ability to focus on work
- Mood swings
- Withdrawal from coworkers
- Sleepiness or fatigue
- Less care of personal appearance
- Signs of substance abuse

Recognizing these behaviors can be even more difficult when working in a remote setting, as is still the case for many organizations. If you are not meeting face to face with your staff, regular check-ins to gauge their emotional health is important. Instead of generically asking, “How are you?”, try more open-ended questions like, “How are you balancing your time?”, or “What are you doing to take care of yourself these days?”

When you hear or notice signs of emotional distress, be prepared to offer appropriate comfort and guidance. Admittedly, this can be challenging for some managers. Fortunately, communicating empathy is a skill that can be taught if it doesn’t come naturally. Check with your human resources (HR) or training department for more information.

Being supportive includes sharing words of sympathy and letting the employee know that you care and want to hear what they are going through. Taking the time to listen is critical. Use body language to communicate that the employee has your full attention. This includes making eye contact and nodding to indicate you are following along. Avoid fidgeting, looking away, or using a judgmental facial expression.

When an employee opens up to you and shares what they are experiencing, it’s important to normalize their emotional response with a statement like, “I think a lot of people feel that way as well” or “That seems like a very normal response to what you described.” You might consider sharing some of your own emotional reactions related to the pandemic. The point of this is not to dominate the conversation with your own feelings, but to affirm the employee’s emotions as real and important.

You should also encourage employees experiencing distress to practice self-care. This includes eating healthy, participating in some physical activity, and getting the appropriate amount of rest. If work-life balance is a struggle, discuss potential solutions.

Finally, be familiar with how to access your company’s employee assistance resources, so you can confidently guide team members to reach out for professional, confidential, emotional-wellbeing support. (The only exception to this confidentiality is when an employee is at risk of harming themselves or others.) You want to be able to share what kind of support is available and the best way to access it.

COVID-19 is affecting everyone, but not everyone is impacted the same way. As a manager, you are in a unique position to recognize when someone is struggling and point them to the support available to help them. Ultimately, your entire team will benefit when this is done well.

Source: Workplace Options. (2020, August). Recognizing and responding to employee needs throughout COVID-19. Raleigh: Author. Retrieved August 20, 2020, from <https://www.workplaceoptions.com>

A Better Way of Dealing with Conflict

Conflict Defined and Described

Conflict happens when two people disagree about something. Despite the fact that people have many similarities, everyone is different from everybody else, and people will have conflicts. Conflict is a natural part of life and happens often.

For example, if a driver coming the opposite way wants to turn the same way you do, that can cause conflict. Most of the time you agree almost instinctively on what each person needs to do. In another setting, suppose that your friend wants to play cards with you, but you want to go to a movie; or suppose that he or she wants to play golf and you want to go fishing—these situations can create conflict. How about choosing a place to spend the holidays? Shall you go to see your spouse's parents, your parents, or both sets of parents; stay at home; or go someplace else? Perhaps you choose to go to each place for a different holiday throughout the year. Most of the time people work it out.

Conflict can be positive and healthy, as well as a learning and growing experience. When people deal with it in a healthy way, they can generally find a solution that satisfies everyone. This is what is called managing conflict.

Unfortunately, conflict also has its negative side, where people not only disagree with each other, but sometimes also hurt feelings and fracture relationships. The purpose of this information is to show you that there are options for finding a better way to manage disagreements.

Methods for Handling Conflict

Customarily, people handle conflict through avoidance or position-based competition. In the avoidance approach, people in conflict simply do not deal with their differences, for example, to keep peace in the family or in the office. This approach is useful if the differences are thought to be insignificant or if the people involved need time to “cool off.” It may be nonproductive if the parties just let the conflict fester.

In the position-based competitive approach, people hold to their positions and try to prevail over the other person. This approach has two strains: the power-based strain and the rights-based strain.

In the power-based strain, people settle their differences according to who has more power. This is a legitimate and important way to handle conflict. For example, without a chain of command, a large organization or agency has no way to organize its efforts. Additionally, without good employees working efficiently to provide care and services, the organization cannot carry out its mission.

In the rights-based strain, the parties in a conflict refer to their legal rights as the basis for resolving their differences. If they cannot reach an agreement, they submit their claims to recognized authorities. The rights-based strain is also a legitimate and necessary way to handle conflicts. Where would people be without court systems and other grievance, complaint, and appeals procedures?

The problem with both strains of the competitive approach is that one person wins and one person loses. As a result, feelings may be hurt, relationships may be unnecessarily weakened or destroyed, and commitment to decisions may be weak. There must be a better way to deal with conflict than this.

There is a better way! People can work together on conflict management to increase the understanding and practise of interest-based problem solving.

Interest-Based Problem Solving

What interest-based problem solving (IBPS) means is that there are times when it makes sense for people who have a problem to sit down together to see if they can solve it by talking about their mutual concerns.

People who are in conflict with each other often have common interests. In the workplace, for example, common interests include the overall success of the organization, communication, teamwork, professional competence for everyone, quality, productivity, ethical treatment, and recognition of diversity.

IBPS has some significant advantages over the avoidance and competitive approaches:

- The parties will be more likely to feel that the decision-making process has been a fair one.
- The parties will tend to be more committed to carrying out the agreements made.
- They are likely to have a greater understanding of, and respect for, each other.
- If future conflicts arise, they will have an example to follow, making it easier for the parties to address the conflict and deal with it constructively.
- IBPS often costs less in the long run than power- or rights-based strains. IBPS produces results and consistently maintains relationships between the parties. It may even improve the relationship.

That is not to say that all conflicts should be handled the same way. Some differences just are not that big a deal. Others may be caused inadvertently, and there is just not much that can be done about them. There will always be a legitimate need for avoidance and competition as solutions to conflict situations.

On the other hand, some disputes are big, important, and tough enough that it makes sense to address them directly. It is important to realize in such situations that you have not two, but three choices in how to do this: avoidance, competition, and analyzing interests.

Recap on How to Deal with Conflict

There are three primary strategies used to deal with conflict:

Flight—Avoiding conflict and hoping that it will go away (avoidance)

Fight—Using authority, rights, or force to attempt to prevail over others (position-based competition)

Unite—Talking with other people to develop solutions that will satisfy mutual interests, and come to some result with which they all can live (IBPS)

Experience shows that people will be more successful in accomplishing their missions using various conflict management techniques. By improving how people deal with conflict, people can change the culture of their organization (or other setting) to remove some of the barriers in reaching their objectives.

If you treat people well and fairly, most of the time they will respond the same way. Also, if you treat each other honestly and fairly, you will create a friendlier working environment. Ordinarily, that can increase quality-driven productivity.

Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (Revised 2019 [Ed.]). A four-step way of dealing with conflict: Introduction (B. Schuette, Ed.). Retrieved September 12, 2019, from <https://www.va.gov>

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. My employee has been late too often over the past several months. I mentioned it to him several times in passing, and then I wrote him up and referred him to the EAP in the memo. What is my next step?

A. Tardiness of employees is a frustrating problem for supervisors. Oddly enough, a common missing piece of the solution is sitting down in private with the employee to discuss the matter and, most importantly, express disappointment. So try this approach. Be sincere. You may be angry and feel like lecturing, but simply express your disappointment. Contrast this disappointment with what you envision for the worker. This can trigger a stronger awareness of responsibility and guilt (which is a good thing). Employees with chronic behavioral issues use defensive mechanisms like denial and rationalization to avoid experiencing any anxiety caused by their improper behavior. Healthy anxiety is the “juice” of change. Your expression of disappointment can overpower this self-reinforcing process and make compliance with the EAP recommendations more certain and success in recovery more likely. If you are trying to avoid disciplinary action, use the foregoing as your next step.

Q. Should I expect an employee to act offended if they are referred to the EAP?

A. Some employees may act offended if referred to the EAP because they believe you are making a declaration of a personal problem, mental illness, or addiction. This reaction is more likely among employees who do not understand the nature of employee assistance programs, have not participated in an orientation to understand the EAP, or do not remember what they were informed of when they did. Although you may have a firm understanding of how to use the EAP in supervision, which directs you to focus solely on performance and avoid the counseling role, the employee may not grasp this principle. To reduce the likelihood of an intractable response, it is helpful to tell your employee that referrals to the EAP by supervisors are based only on the performance issues relevant to your discussion, nothing more. Also stress the confidential nature of the EAP, the non-inclusion of a record of the referral in a personnel file, and nothing about the presenting problem, if any, being given to you.

Q. Without an EAP, employers can tolerate troubled employees or eventually terminate them when problems grow more severe. The EAP offers a third option. I understand this point. However, employees have always had the ability to seek help on their own, right? So what changes with an EAP in place?

A. Several dynamics are in play when establishing an EAP. 1) Employees have easier access to help without having to explore and research other sources that may not fit their particular problem. 2) An EAP is therefore a “pre-treatment” to discover the best solution path for the presenting problem. 3) EAPs know when to suggest better communication with the employer to improve the situation. They’ll recommend an employee (voluntarily) sign a release, if needed, to provide limited information validating EAP participation and follow-through with the program’s recommendations, particularly when performance issues are severe enough that job loss could become a concern. 4) EAPs work with the employee’s needs and the employer’s needs in mind. These are only a few of the positive EAP dynamics that make all the difference in salvaging workers and protecting the bottom line.

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