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Q. My primary concern as a supervisor is whether the work is getting done, but I am hesitant about pressuring workers — the fear being that pressuring them and interfering with work-life balance will prompt thoughts of quitting. What's the solution?

A. Holding employees accountable is important, but it's equally important to not make them feel overwhelmed or micromanaged. Here are some tips: (1) Communicate about communication: Start by clearly communicating your desire to avoid communicating with them in such a way that routine follow-up is misperceived as undue pressure or dissatisfaction. This will lessen their anxiety when you do inquire about progress or completion. (2) Set clear expectations: Start by communicating clearly about what you expect from your employees but use a participative approach where they can help decide deadlines. Key: Be sure employees have what they need to succeed. This helps them take ownership for completing work on time. Don't follow up only about deadlines and progress. Also have frequent follow-up about resource needs, process questions, and problem-solving. Another key: If you model being on time with your work, and staying on task, you will influence workers to do the same and will ultimately have to follow up less.

Q. I believe I could benefit from understanding more clearly what employees say are their main complaints about supervisors. What does survey research show?

A. An Interact/Harris poll of 1,000 U.S. workers in 2015 showed consistency with virtually all similar research, that communication issues topped the #1 complaint of employees. But this is only half the story. Delving deeper, these communication issues seem to separate themselves into nine major areas in order of how common they appear among supervisors. 1) Not recognizing an employee's achievements; 2) Not giving clear directions; 3) Not having time to meet with employees; 4) Refusing to talk with subordinates; 5) Taking credit for others' ideas; 6) Not offering constructive criticism; 7) Not knowing employees' names; 8) Refusing to talk with people on the phone or in person; and 9) Not asking about employees' lives. Imagine how easy it is to identify or discover whether any of these issues apply to you and how simple it might be to improve on any of them.

Q. Are some employees less likely than others to be successful with professional counseling? I think a few of my employees wouldn't be as successful at the EAP because they seem to be difficult people.

A. Although some difficult employees under your supervision may appear less capable of being successful in counseling, the opposite could easily be true. All employees deserve an equal chance to improve job performance, so be careful not to allow biases to influence your decision concerning referral. Some employees may lack motivation to change, but this can be overcome by motivational counseling techniques. Other employees may lack willingness to trust a counselor, but with time spent focused on building trust and confidence, the primary problem can be addressed. Stigma is often addressed with education and awareness. Some employees with personality disorders may be more difficult to engage in counseling, but this tends to be a small minority of employee-clients, and much depends on the rigidity of defense mechanisms and willingness to engage in problem solving. Never assume resistance to counseling means a person is hopeless or beyond help.

