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Q. Can anyone be taught to be a good supervisor or do some personality or temperament issues impede being an effective supervisor?

A. Supervisory skills are teachable; however, some people may possess natural abilities, qualities of personality, or temperament that facilitate a supervisory or leadership role. This does not mean others aren't teachable. A person may struggle to be an effective supervisor if they lack a well-developed sense of empathy. Empathy is associated with a broad range of important capabilities, such as emotional intelligence (EI). EI is the ability to recognize and manage one's own emotions and those of others. But empathy goes much further. It is crucial, for example, in facilitating active listening and understanding. When people feel heard and understood, they are more likely to express themselves honestly. They feel safer with the authority figure, and this leads to better dialogue, problem-solving, and conflict resolution within the relationship. Supervisors have a great resource in their EAP to help them develop many soft skills associated with leadership and communication. Empathy is one of them.

Q. We've all heard the respect is earned line; difficult employees often use it as a snarky comeback. As a supervisor, what do I say to an employee who acts inappropriately and tells me respect is earned, using an inappropriate tone of voice?

A. It may be aggravating to hear this remark when supervising an employee. Typically, it is considered an inappropriate challenge to your authority, not a benign comment. Regardless, it's important to handle the situation with professionalism and assertiveness. An oversight with employees who use this remark is that although respect is earned, it is a two-way street. Your goal should not be to "outsmart" the employee, however. An appropriate response might be, "As your supervisor, it's my responsibility to ensure a respectful and productive work environment for everyone. Respect is indeed earned, and it is a two-way street. It is important that we maintain professionalism and treat each other with respect in our interactions. So, let's find a way to address concerns together and create a positive and productive work environment for everyone involved." As a side note, documentable concerns with this sort of interaction might be, "Lack of professional demeanor"; "Not demonstrating a respectful attitude"; or "Using a tone of voice that communicates a contentious attitude."

Q. People sometimes say I am a workaholic. I don't think so. Sure, I work a lot, but I don't think only the number of hours worked should result in being classified a workaholic. I think other people feel uncomfortable because they don't work enough. Also, I am very dedicated to the company.

A. If your health, well-being, and the relationships in your life are not adversely affected by the number of hours you work, then it is unlikely that you suffer from workaholism (also known as addiction to work). Ask yourself if any of the following are true: 1) Are you preoccupied with work-related thoughts, even outside of work hours? 2) Do you find it difficult to establish boundaries between work and personal life? 3) Beyond working a lot of hours, do you have a compulsive need to do so? (Generally, this means having an irresistible urge or impulse to work.) 4) Do you continue to work despite its negative effect on your health and complaints from people you have strained relationships with because of overwork? 5) If you try to relax, is it difficult due to anxiety and restlessness because you are not working? Talk to the EAP if any of these answers are "yes."

Q. A concern that reduces my assertiveness as a supervisor is having to make a decision that is not popular and reaping the animosity, hearing arguments against the decision that I can't defend, and seeing it affect morale negatively. How can I let go of this worry or fear?

A. The fear of making an unpopular decision is virtually unavoidable, and all supervisors must face this challenge to be effective. You can let go of it by: 1) Reminding yourself that your primary responsibility is to make decisions that align with the goals of the organization. If you primarily fear not being liked by subordinates, then these two goals will naturally conflict. 2) Frequently involving team members and seeking their input and feedback regarding decisions. This inclusive approach can help you gather different perspectives and dramatically reduce conflict later. Also, it is at this stage where you should communicate your rationale for a decision, not later when staff are reacting adversely to it. 3) Establishing a work environment that enables communication to flow easily. When conflict arises, even from your decisions, tension will be reduced more quickly. 4) Building a relationship of trust with your employees. Doing so will also reduce animosity and objections to the important decisions you make. Likewise, do not be a supervisor who stays behind closed doors.

Q. I got into an argument with my employee and believed his body language indicated he would strike me. It didn't happen, and there's nothing to prove he would, but I documented the incident. What else should I have done?

A. When you perceive a potential threat from an employee during an argument, it's important to prioritize your safety and take appropriate steps to address the incident. Firstly, remove yourself from the situation—and find a safe place away from the employee. You documented this incident, great. Make sure you include the date, time, location, what was said, and a detailed description of the employee's actions. Be objective by focusing on observable facts. For example, "Both arms were trembling, he had clenched fists, and he leaned into my personal space." Avoid assumptions and interpretations in documentation because it can undermine your goal of addressing the behavior effectively. For example, "He was acting insane in our argument" or "His rebellious nature is a problem for everyone in the work unit."