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Q. The literature often uses the word “loyal” when describing valued employees. I want employees to work hard, show respect, and give their best to the company, but to me as a supervisor, loyalty seems a little strong, like “blind allegiance.” Can you clarify this term?

A. Loyalty implies that your employee exhibits a strong sense of commitment, trust, or allegiance to their employer. Disloyal employees will typically experience more disagreements with their supervisor, perceive a lack of support or fairness in the workplace, and show strained communication with co-workers and supervisors. Like someone tending a garden, supervisors must constantly be on the move, addressing conflicts and concerns among workers. Doing so helps produce loyal workers. Your employees will feel a sense of loyalty if you remain transparent and open with information, offer support and recognition, set a positive example in your work style that they can follow, resolve conflicts, listen, give them feedback, and show a genuine interest in their lives. Demonstrated disloyalty is often the sign of a troubled employee. Work with your EAP to either help the employee or analyze what more you can do to improve your supervision style to nurture the loyalty you need.

Q. A tragic incident occurred at work, and I felt caught off guard because employees immediately looked to me for direction and leadership. Frankly, I was at a loss to know where to begin. I felt I let folks down. How can supervisors improve their ability to respond to a crisis?

A. Many resources exist to help you manage an unexpected crisis or accident in the workplace. Speak to your HR Business Partner or department. Discover any existing crisis or incident protocols. Be well versed in these emergency response procedures (evacuation, shelter-in-place protocols, and first aid). Schedule a periodic review of procedures. As a rule, be calm and demonstrate resilience in a crisis. Immediately establish regular communication channels, like group meetings, emails, or instant messages, to keep everyone updated. Don't become dictatorial in a crisis, but rely on the experience and common sense of an assembled team to help address issues. Prioritize the well-being of employees, and reinforce use of the EAP. Your EAP provides supervisor consultations and critical incident responses to help restore employees to their baseline functioning after a traumatic incident. Remember, no one can anticipate every possible disruption, but taking proactive steps can make you better prepared to face them.

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Q. I think my employees have good stress management skills. I don't detect any signs or symptoms of excessive workloads. I figure if they don't speak up, it is safe to say that work distribution is about right. Correct?

A. There are reasons an employee might not choose to complain about their workload. However, engaging with employees, asking questions, and listening carefully will help you discover those workers who are in distress. An employee might worry that expressing concerns about the workload could lead to negative consequences, such as being seen as incapable of handling the work. Pressure to conform to this perceived norm and avoid standing out might keep them mum. Also, a strong desire to please the supervisor or maintain a positive image within the team could explain not speaking up. Job security concerns are another issue if the employee believes complaining would make him or her appear expendable. Another reason to engage with workers is to be able to spot performance issues that could be related to problems like depression, stress, anxiety, and conflict. These can be “masked,” which means you don't see the symptoms.

Q. What are some tips for building relationships with employees in the workplace with the goal of understanding their needs and strengths and detecting issues and problems (even personal problems) earlier?

A. There are many ways to get to know your employees. 1) Make it OK for employees to meet you for conversations, and establish safe spaces so they can share with you privately what's important. 2) A few times a year, schedule regular meetings for a few minutes one-on-one to discuss workload and challenges. 3) Do not discuss just work. Show real concern for their well-being by expressing interest in their work life and happiness on the job. 4) Share and disclose some of your own work struggles in your career history so employees see the “real you.” This will make you relatable, which is a powerful relationship-building dynamic that builds loyalty. 5) Be quicker to understand and learn employees' perspectives rather than make immediate judgment calls about their work, ideas, and problems. 6) Offer feedback and praise. This will cause them to speak up sooner about challenges before they become larger problems.

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