



Leadership Today

Federal Workplace Solutions

Summer 2004

Dealing with an Angry Employee

Welcome to the first issue of Leadership Today provided by Federal Occupational Health (FOH), a service unit within the Department of Health and Human Services' Program Support Center. We publish this e-magazine several times a year as a resource, with a separate, specialized edition available for members of our FOH Consortium Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

This issue's topic represents a serious management challenge:
The aggressive employee whose negative behavior impacts the entire workplace.

(1) Challenge of the Day - What to do with an Angry Employee

The workplace is a natural forum for all human emotions, including frustration and anger. How can we help prevent workplace anger from leading to disciplinary action, or even worse, a violent incident? Angry behavior can often be traced to strife that has intensified over time between employees or between an employee and a supervisor. Sometimes an employee's behavior problems may be exacerbated by the employee's belief that his or her supervisor offers no support. The next section, "Exploring the Frontline", presents a supportive, yet effective way of intervening when an employee displays a sudden, negative behavior change.

(2) Exploring the Issue - Gus*: A case of sudden behavior change

This situation, submitted by a concerned supervisor, describes a common problem:

Q. During the past month, Gus, a generally reliable and easygoing employee, has exhibited outbursts of anger toward his co-workers and me when discussing work-related matters. Recently, when I gave Gus a work assignment that he disliked, he walked off and slammed the door. Some employees have complained and are beginning to avoid interacting with Gus because they don't want to be subjected to his negative behavior. Gus's behavior is having a negative impact on productivity, and employee morale is beginning to suffer. I want to talk to him about this, but dread an outburst. What can I do?

A. Gus's recent behavior change has negatively impacted productivity and team morale. This change in behavior could have been triggered by a multitude of issues. As Gus's supervisor, you are aware that your role is to assess and resolve workplace issues, not to diagnose and resolve personal problems.

Yet, in your efforts to ensure a productive and safe workplace, the immediate challenge is to help the employee feel valued and supported as you explore what is happening from his perspective.

As a starting point, it is wise to acknowledge your own reaction to any stressful work situation. Various resources are available to assist you in preparing to address issues with an employee.

These include, among others, your own supervisor, the human resources manager, and the EAP.

- Brief your own supervisor on your observations and get his or her consultation.
- From your human resources manager, you can obtain important information concerning your organization's practices for handling employee performance and behavioral issues, as well as existing programs to deal with workplace violence or workplace threats of violence. Your human resources manager may be able to provide you with step-by-step coaching on documenting your observations and communicating your expectation of behavior change.
- Contact the EAP for consultation and assistance as needed. The EAP will be able to advise you on the best way to refer the employee to the EAP, including steps to take, whether the referral should be formal or informal, and how to follow up once a referral has been made.

The time you spend in consultation with management, human resources, and EAP professionals in the beginning, when the problem arises, will help ensure that your efforts have the highest probability of success.

Approaching an employee about a problem can be challenging and the employee's response difficult to predict. The goal is balancing directness with sensitivity. Preparation is the key to your success. See how this approach can 'play out' below:

* A pseudonym

(3) Play It Out

The Dynamics

Choose a time when the employee seems more at ease. Perhaps it will be after lunch, or when his workload is lighter.

In a relaxed, yet concerned, manner, suggest that he sit down in a private place to talk with you. Have a quiet location in mind where you won't be disturbed.

Let him know that you value his contribution and past behavior.

The Conversation

"There are some things that I have been wanting to check out with you. Do you have a few minutes to talk?"

"Gus, you have always been someone we count on to help out when a hand is really needed."

You have noticed a change in his behavior that you would like to explore with him. Describe this behavior and its effect on work. Stick to the behavior itself and avoid being judgmental. You can generalize, but be ready with a recent example. However, avoid presenting a laundry list of problems.

"But, in some ways, you haven't been yourself recently. It seems to me that you have had a shorter fuse regarding work requests. For example, last Friday, when Sue asked you to help her out, I heard you tell her that she could (darn well) do it herself. I am concerned about the difference in you, as well as in your work. I'd like to hear your thoughts."

Stay quiet. Give him time to think and respond to you. Then, really listen to what he says. Think before responding.

He may either tell you that he:

(1) doesn't know what you are talking about, or
(2) is having personal, emotional or work problems

If he does not admit there is an issue, give him a few more observations about his recent behavior and its negative impact on the way people work together -- specifically, those situations in which you have been directly involved. Avoid quoting other individuals by name. Respond appropriately as a supervisor to any work-related issues, but avoid falling into the role of counselor. Also avoid evaluating his behavior in terms of it being right or wrong.

"Just yesterday, after our discussion about the project work, you walked out of my office, slamming the door behind you. This type of behavior doesn't help us here on the job. In fact, I'm concerned about it negatively affecting our team morale."

Pause and listen carefully again.

He may either:

(1) agree with you, admitting a behavior change, or
(2) continue to deny a problem exists

Let him know that, for the good of the workplace, he needs to change his behavior. Remind him that the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) helps in dealing with any personal or work challenges that may be contributing to his behavior change. Let him know that he needs to resume his previous cooperative behavior and that you want to offer him the support of the EAP in making this change.

"Gus, we need you to be the active contributor here that you were before. You had an even disposition, a real positive approach to getting things done, and no temper outbursts. I am sorry that you (*tailor this depending on his responses*) (1) are having problems and/or (2) don't agree with my observations. For the good of the workplace, we all need to work together in harmony, which means we need you to maintain a calm disposition at work."

Since you will have already spoken with the EAP yourself, you will know whether to make this an informal (as modeled here) or a formal referral. Give the employee some EAP written material that includes the contact information. Regardless of his decision about the EAP, inform him that you will also need to follow up with him on a regular basis to give him feedback on his progress.

A resource that has helped many people is the EAP. They can give you an additional viewpoint and some support.

Now, let's plan on getting together next week (*tailor this depending on the most appropriate time frame*) and compare notes on how we see things going for you."

(4) TIP of the Day

Good feedback on workplace behavior includes these steps

- Give a prompt, concrete description of behavior you observed and want to encourage or discourage.
- Listen openly, putting aside your own agenda.
- Avoid labeling the individual based on his or her actions.
- Avoid evaluating the actions in terms of right or wrong.
- Assess the appropriateness of the behavior in terms of its impact on the workplace.
- Avoid becoming involved in the employee's personal issues. Instead, focus on work-related concerns.
- If a change is desired, give a clear description of the expected new behavior.

(5) About this E-magazine

Federal Occupational Health (FOH) has a wide range of programs to improve the health, safety and productivity of the Federal workforce. These programs include Employee Assistance/Member and Family Support, Work/Life Solutions, Clinical Health Services, Environmental Services, and other special programs. The FOH EAP provides assessment, counseling, referral, training and consultation to Federal employees and agencies worldwide. This goal of this e-magazine is to help Federal leaders address their workplace relationship concerns. For further information about FOH and its programs, call us at 1 800 457-9808 or visit our web site at www.foh.dhhs.gov.

The articles that appear in Leadership Today are published as background information and, as such, do not address specific human resource management concerns. For guidance on handling issues that arise in your workplace, please consult your employee assistance and/or human resources professional.

Portions of the section entitled "Exploring the Issue" have been adapted from The Frontline Supervisor, DFA Publications

healthy bodies • sound minds • a safe place to work

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