The Frontline Supervisor

WAYNE Corporation Quality Employee Assistance Programs

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Q. Our workplace of 28 employees is a peaceful, high-morale environment. I have never seen conflict, and it simply can't be any more ideal, but is this normal? I have always read and heard that conflict is normal and some of it is healthy.

A. You're right that conflict is normal and can be healthy when it leads to improvements that affect people and systems for the better. Either your workplace experiences no conflicts, or it could be that conflict is avoided. A nice workplace can hide dysfunction, just like in families. This is called "false harmony." If this is the case, conflicts may brew beneath the surface. Does your no-conflict workplace also translate to "important issues and conversations don't happen"? In some workplaces, the culture dictates nonverbally that disagreements are not welcome. If true, then passive-aggressive behaviors often exist. It's even possible for truth-telling to be discouraged in the false-harmony workplace. Here are some diagnostic questions: Do you create a psychologically safe environment where honesty is encouraged? Do you support healthy dissent even if it rocks the boat? More importantly, do you model these behaviors yourself? Which do you value more—surface peace or authentic engagement?

Q. I met with my team and could tell some tension existed between two employees. I ignored it because no one was complaining, but something felt off. I view issues like this as normal, and it's up to employees to work things out on their own. Did I handle this correctly?

A. You can't assume that silence means the issues will ultimately be resolved. Team morale often erodes not because of overt problems but because of unspoken conflicts, resentments, and lingering tension. Employees will cope with these sorts of stressors on their own, but not necessarily for the benefit of the work unit. It's more likely that passive-aggressive behaviors will appear, and not the small stuff like refusing to say, "good morning." More likely it's reduced collaboration, poor cooperation with deadlines, or withdrawal from the team. This affects team productivity. A better approach is to note the clues that indicate a problem, meet with employees, and ask what's going on. Literally say, "Let's have an honest conversation about what's going on between you two." Creating this space will help resolve the problem but ask that employees use the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) if issues continue after your attempt to get them resolved.

Q. I learned a hard lesson the other day about giving timely feedback when I gave negative (constructive) feedback to my employee about using a sarcastic tone with a customer a week after it happened. When I finally mentioned it, the employee got very irate.

A. More should be written about giving feedback to employees after too much time has passed. Whether it's waffling on the decision to give feedback, mulling over the right words, or suddenly feeling obligated to give feedback, delay is a huge problem. Without timely feedback, employees will usually assume everything is fine (or worse, feel as though they have done the right thing). It's likely your employee felt ambushed under such circumstances. Here's the key takeaway: Feedback does not have to be perfect when you give it, but give it anyway. This is the only time that details and emotions are fresh. As time passes, feedback becomes less useful or suspect. If you feel the need to give feedback that is delayed, role-play it with a colleague or consider meeting with the EAP. You'll gain even more insights about communicating with employees.

Q. My employee's dog died, and he's been distraught. Because death of a pet can rival that of a loved one, we offered time off. Currently, I need to be assertive and get him back to work because he's been out so long, but I am struggling with taking action.

A. You're trying to be an empathetic supervisor but also impose accountability. You need clear communication that supports your employee without excusing the behavior. Admittedly, this creates tension, but it is made worse because there appears to be no predetermined time limit for the leave. Setting one now may feel arbitrary, but without it, you send a message that performance expectations are secondary. Remember, even in this situation, your role isn't to solve personal problems or whatever issues are associated with the protracted absence. The appropriate next step is to suggest contacting the EAP while requiring a date to return to work. Compassion doesn't mean putting core responsibilities on hold. It means offering support while also keeping focus on core performance standards and your operation. Supervisors lead best when they show empathy *and* can uphold expectations. These two things are not in opposition to each other. They *reinforce* each other.

Q. Over the years I've noticed that employees pay more attention to what their boss does than what they say. I think more of us need to understand this reality. I don't think most supervisors understand the great influence they have in establishing the workplace's culture.

A. Your observation is correct, and there is research to attest to it. How a supervisor behaves, which includes attitude and demeanor, among other behaviors—influences work culture. Supervisors must accept that what they model matters, and therefore self-awareness is crucial to the role. In the book "Trust Rules: How the World's Best Managers Create Great Places to Work," author Bob Lee describes "leadership drift," a relationship dynamic that molds a work culture shaped by the supervisor's tone, energy style, and daily demeanor. This can drift for better or worse. Employees keenly notice supervisor behaviors. This is especially true in moments of stress or frustration or during a crisis. These influences of leadership prove to be contagious and thereby influence the work culture. When supervisors suspect or notice adverse effects on their mental health, turning to the EAP for support can play a significant role in helping ensure behaviors do not adversely affect the work culture.