

Leading Well – October 2026

Practical Questions & Answers for Frontline Leaders

Q: One employee on my team seems to find something negative in almost every situation. His work is good, but the constant complaining is starting to wear on the rest of the team. How should I address it?

A: When negativity begins affecting coworkers or team morale, it becomes a leadership issue, even when the employee is otherwise performing well.

Focus on the impact rather than labeling the employee as "negative." You might say, "I've noticed that concerns are often raised without much focus on possible solutions, and I think it's beginning to affect the team. I'd like us to work on a more constructive approach."

Healthy disagreement can improve a workplace. The goal is to distinguish between raising legitimate concerns and repeatedly contributing to an atmosphere that makes it harder for others to work effectively.

Q: I need to give an employee some direct feedback, but she tends to become defensive. I find myself softening the message so much that I'm not sure she understands the problem. Is there a better approach?

A: Avoiding clarity to prevent an uncomfortable reaction usually helps neither the leader nor the employee. Effective feedback can be both direct and respectful.

Keep the conversation specific: describe the behavior, explain its impact, and clarify what needs to change. For example, "You've interrupted coworkers several times during our team meetings. It makes it difficult for others to contribute. Going forward, I need you to allow people to finish before responding."

Give the employee an opportunity to respond but remember that listening does not mean withdrawing the expectation. Good feedback remains respectful, fair, and clear.

Q: Gossip has become a problem within my team. Most of it seems harmless, but I've noticed employees speculating about coworkers' personal lives and complaining about one another. When should a leader step in?

A: Informal conversation is part of every workplace, but leaders should pay attention when it begins undermining trust, respect, or someone's sense of belonging.

You don't need to police every conversation. Instead, establish expectations about respectful workplace communication and intervene when discussions become personal, demeaning, or disruptive. Leaders also set the tone through their own behavior. Participating in gossip, even casually, can signal that similar behavior is acceptable.

If gossip or interpersonal tension has become entrenched within a team, the EAP may also assist with consultation, conflict-management strategies, or workplace training. The objective isn't to eliminate casual conversation, but to prevent a workplace habit from becoming a culture problem.

Q: I have an employee who seems to challenge almost everything I say. Our conversations are becoming increasingly frustrating, and I'm worried my own irritation is beginning to show. How do I keep this productive?

A: When interactions become frustrating, it's easy to begin thinking of someone as a "difficult employee." That label can become a trap because it focuses attention on the person rather than the behaviors that need to change.

Before your next conversation, identify exactly what is creating the problem. Is the employee argumentative? Dismissive? Ignoring direction? Challenging decisions inappropriately? Specific behaviors give you something concrete to address.

It can also be helpful to examine your own reactions. If you enter every conversation expecting resistance, your tone and body language may unintentionally contribute to the pattern.

When you're too close to a situation to feel objective, an EAP supervisor consultation can help you separate frustration from the performance or conduct issue, plan the conversation, and approach the employee with a clearer strategy.

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