

# THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

*Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource--Employees*

*April 2006*

***Q. In a meeting, an employee was starting to criticize a peer when he paused and said, "I was told in the EAP to be more positive, so let me restate that." No one knew he had been to the EAP. It was a bit awkward, but is there any problem with this type of disclosure?***

***A.*** There is nothing improper about an individual disclosing participation in the EAP. In fact, some people find it helps to share the insights they gain from the EAP with their friends at work. Telling others about their EAP sessions can strengthen their commitment to follow through and change their behavior. By stating his goal of speaking more positively, an employee can reinforce what he learned from the EA professional. While it's fine for EAP participants to declare how they intend to modify their own behavior, it would be inappropriate for them to reveal what was said about others in the EAP. In the above example, the employee would be on shaky ground if he said, "I was told in the EAP that some of you are intimidated by me, so I need to lighten up."

***Q. My boss says I need to develop better ways to motivate my staff. But I think I do a really good job of explaining what they must do and what's at stake. Doesn't that make me a strong motivator?***

***A.*** There is more to motivating employees than telling them what to do and why it matters. You also need to arouse their passion about work. That requires an awareness of their "hot buttons"—a keen understanding of

what they value most. Examples include recognition, money, flexibility, job security, freedom, and independence. The only way you can identify what drives someone is to listen and learn. Chat with each of your employees to find out about their goals, aspirations, and special skills and talents that they want to apply more fully to their jobs. Be sure to ask what causes them to feel motivated. They will tell you. In the meantime, assume that enjoying personal growth in one's work, earning sincere praise, and doing meaningful work are three core motivators for just about everyone.

***Q. I am a recovering alcoholic, and although I have no intention of disclosing it, my employee told me he is going to Alcoholics Anonymous to "try to cut back" on his drinking. He needs medical detoxification, not just AA. Should I say anything? There are no performance issues.***

***A.*** No, you should not say anything to your employee. Your experience as a recovering alcoholic does not qualify you to offer unsolicited advice to him. As with any illness, assure your employee that you will provide whatever support you can during this challenging time. Praise him for going to AA, and urge him to make it a top priority. Strongly suggest that he take advantage of the services offered by the EAP. If he truly needs detoxification, then it will become clear soon enough as he works closely with other AA members, many of whom understand the role of medical support for addictive disease in the

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initiation of long-term, successful recovery.

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***Q. I have made promises that I have not been able to keep concerning increasing people's pay, changing the work unit, and hiring help to share the workload. I haven't kept these promises because I don't have final "say-so." How do I improve my reputation?***

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**A.** The desire to say anything that will improve morale sometimes leads supervisors to make promises they can't keep. If you lack the authority to fulfill certain promises, don't make them. Failure to follow through undermines your ability to supervise your unit. You lose credibility, and your employees will look elsewhere for leadership. The next time you're tempted to state a promise, stop and ask yourself if you can control variables that may keep you from delivering on it. Enlist higher-ups to support your goal. Confirm that internal systems are in place so that you can do what you say. Check that you have the tools and resources (such as the necessary budget) to deliver on your commitment. When you do decide to issue a promise, treat it seriously. Write it down in your day planner. Set mini-deadlines along the way so that you hold yourself accountable for making steady progress. Keep employees informed so that they appreciate your diligence and determination. Don't get caught with them needing to remind you.

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***Q. I disciplined an employee with a three-day suspension and immediately had several employees confront me. They insisted on knowing all the particulars, but I said it was inappropriate to discuss it. They were very angry at me, but did I do the right thing?***

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**A.** Yes. The information related to the discipline of an employee is not public information. It's a private matter between you and the individual. It is natural for others to be curious—to want to play judge and jury—but that does not mean you must indulge them. Revealing the specifics of a disciplinary action to employees can lower their confidence in your leadership. Staffers know that a supervisor must show discretion and respect each person's privacy. As much as they may clamor to know what happened and why, they surely realize that you would be acting irresponsibly if you shared the details of the suspension. Your best response is "I'm sure you can understand that this is confidential, and I cannot discuss it." If they persist, resist the urge to modify your response. The minute you start revealing little bits of information, employees will demand to know even more.

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