■ **An employee is returning to work after the death of a family member. I want to be supportive, but I also need to manage the workload. How do I approach this without appearing too work focused? I'm very concerned that what's facing us here will get in the way of productivity demands.**

Meet with your employee in private and acknowledge the death: "I'm sorry for your loss. It's good to see you." Let the conversation naturally evolve. You can transition to the subject of workload by asking what would help the employee settle back into the office. Your employee may share information about the death, but you will be surprised at how fast they will want to move on to discussing workplace needs. Explain which tasks need attention now, which ones can wait, and whom they can turn to if they need help. Agree on a time to check in again after a few days. Grief affects concentration, energy, and patience. People experience it in different ways. Being supportive is key, but keep your expectations clear and do a lot of checking in for a while. This will help you pick up on anything your employee may be struggling to manage. Remind the employee about the EAP or workplace resources.

■ **I assign work, but some employees give me no updates unless I ask. The work may eventually get done, yet I lose time chasing these folks down to find out what's going on. How can I change this without micromanaging, which, of course, every employee hates?**

Most problems of this nature boil down to communication, every organization's biggest problem. Think about clear communication as the culprit in most workplace performance management issues and you'll prevent half of the problems you face throughout the year. Going forward, make updates (communication) part of the assignment from the start. Put communication first in your discussion by explaining what a finished result looks like, when you need it, and what decisions depend on its progress. That's three key points of discussion. Agree on a brief update point. For example, "Send me a progress note every Thursday afternoon, even if everything is on track." Some assignments might last for months. In such situations, you must set milestones, but don't let things just float along or give "How's it going?" comments in the hallway. With milestones, tell employees what you want: 1) what is finished, 2) what remains, and 3) whether they need a decision or assistance. With these fixes, you'll discover higher and faster productivity, less stress, and fewer crises on the job.

■ **I'm hiring for a position with a steep learning curve, so no applicant will be able to jump right in. I've found that eagerness to learn can matter as much as, or more than, prior experience. How**

Think about the last time you had to learn something unfamiliar at work. You probably asked questions, tried things out, made a few mistakes, and adjusted. Spot this type of story when you interview candidates. Ask them about a skill they had to learn quickly: How did they get started? What did they do when they got stuck? Did they use feedback? Many employees will say they are fast learners, but fewer will be able to give specific examples to show how. You might also give every candidate the same realistic job

can I spot that quality in a candidate and evaluate whether they're willing to put in the effort to learn this job?

scenario and ask how they would learn the work. Observe how they construct a workable approach, not offer a perfect answer. Even someone eager to learn can get frustrated or feel overwhelmed. Enthusiastic employees may also be hard on themselves, so notice their progress and remind them that the EAP is available if stress or personal concerns are getting in the way.

■ **I believe supervisors would think about praising employees for good work more often if they knew the benefits that derive from it. What are they?**

When an employee makes a meaningful contribution, recognizing it at a staff meeting or in front of a larger group of people does more than make that person feel good. It has an impact on the entire organization, but many supervisors don't understand why. Public praise has ripple effects. It creates a "wave" of organizational well-being that raises workplace morale. To make the right impact, don't just say, "Great job, Maria." Plan your comments and drill down. For example, "Everyone, Maria noticed an ongoing customer problem. She gathered the team, brainstormed the solution, and ended this problem we've had for years. So, great job." A supervisor speaking like this gives coworkers something to learn about solving problems. It also says to others that effort gets noticed in this organization. Note that some employees don't like public accolades, so it's okay to ask the worker in advance if you are unsure. Bottom line: Praising workers helps employees, the team, and the organization, but it costs nothing.

■ **One of my employees regularly challenges the team's ideas. Some coworkers call him difficult, to say the least, but his suggestions are often useful. Could the EAP help me manage this situation?**

You have an employee who is a valuable part of your team, but he has an abrasive style that is alienating others. Yes, the EAP can help, and in two ways: either meeting directly with your employee or coaching you on how to manage and/or refer him to the program if you are unsuccessful in helping him make needed changes in his interactions with peers. The key to your success is separating his intellect from his style. You don't want him to believe he is being criticized for being smart. It's the delivery that's problematic. Start by validating his contributions. Then, turn to how his style affects others in ways that you have observed. You must be specific. Saying "People think you are too abrasive" won't cut it. Examples of behaviors he may display include rolling eyes, sighing heavily, or interrupting. Behaviors of affected peers may include visibly shutting down, stopping participation, or looking reluctant to share ideas. If your direct coaching does not improve his relationship with peers, consult the EAP to establish a formal performance referral.

NOTES

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