

# Managing People at Work

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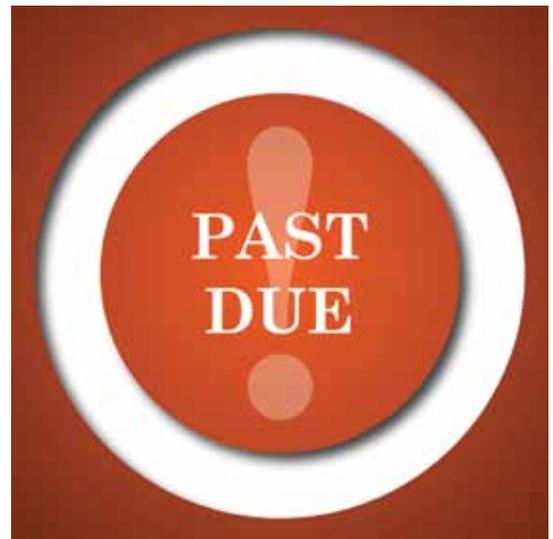
## Worker calls in sick after you denied the day off

It's a fairly common scenario: An employee requests a day off on a day that he must be there. Then your phone rings in the morning, and he's telling you he's feeling ill and won't be in. How do you handle this?

You must consider a number of factors before taking any action. Although circumstantial evidence indicates that the employee took an unauthorized day off, there is a possibility that she may have been sick. But you must take some action or your authority will be seriously undermined. Other employees who had been forced to follow the rule will be watching carefully to see what happens. If the answer is “nothing,” you can count on a number of other convenient “illnesses.”

To address situations like this, try these tactics.

- **Examine the past record.** Are there any other instances of insubordination or questionable behavior from the employee? Has the employee been disciplined in the past? How and for what? How are his performance appraisals and discipline records?
- **Get the facts.** Did the employee recognize that he was breaking a rule? Is there a possibility that the rule wasn't broken? Might he really have been sick? Don't try to make a disciplinary decision until you know all the circumstances.
- **How have you dealt with other insubordinate employees who have broken the same rule?** The discipline must be consistent with both your policy and past practice. You have the right to be less severe with a veteran employee with a good record than a newcomer with a series of bad reports, so long as your policy and practice give you some flexibility.
- **Is the policy or rule itself creating the problem?** Could you consider some sort of accommodation that would allow options, such as employees covering for each other during busy periods? An insubordinate act by a good employee might be an indication that a change is in order.
- **Base the confrontation with the worker only on his job performance.** Never allow any personal prejudices, comments, observations, or suggestions to get in the way of the counseling/discipline meeting.
- **Don't make value judgments.** Stick to the job description at hand, not what you think of the employee personally.
- **Don't make idle or thinly veiled threats.** Doing so only serves to make the confrontation less productive and strains relations even more.



## When an appraisal is long overdue

If you haven't found the time in a long while to review your people's performance, should you just forget about it? Not at all, but as you embark on long-overdue appraisals, keep these points in mind:

**Stay honest.** As a snapshot of an employee's current performance, an appraisal can be equally valid whether it's right on time or years overdue. If a worker is currently struggling in an important area, say so.

However, if an employee has never had a review, or if new responsibilities have been added since the last appraisal, note that as context for your rankings. Those facts don't excuse poor performance, but they do affect the reliability of your assessment—poor compared to what?

**Stay with the script.** Frame your appraisal in terms of the last appraisal, if there was one. For employees new to their current jobs, start with the key duties and responsibilities as laid out in the job description under which they were hired. If those starting points are out of date now, then secure agreement with the employee on what should be part of the current appraisal.

Unless you're ranking everybody against one another on a set of common criteria, any appraisal based on a brand-new set of standards has to be provisional. Only with the next review, using those same criteria, can you draw hard-and-fast conclusions about performance.

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# Loosen up an aloof worker

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You encourage teamwork among your staff, but no amount of preaching will help if certain workers relish their independence, bear grudges against co-workers or fear being left out when it's time to roll the credits.

To win them over, meet with them privately and ask four questions:

### 1. How do you rate your job?

Gauge how well the employee is satisfied. If he bellyaches about his role, low pay or other problems, don't expect more team involvement to improve his attitude.

Propose a deal: Suggest ways to make his job better in exchange for his collaboration. For example, give him a small budget to test his ideas on the condition that he actively contribute half his time to team projects.

**2. How does your job affect others?** Help the employee appreciate how others depend on him and vice versa—even if he views

himself as a lone wolf. Show how the system can break down if he drops the ball. This way, he'll understand that he's already part of a team.

**3. Who helps you do your job?** When a leave-me-alone employee sees that much of his success flows from other people's efforts, he may grow less aloof. Identify those who enable him to function effectively: a marketer who sells his product, an HR manager who helps him hire staff or a network administrator who troubleshoots his computer.

Say, "These folks see you as part of their team. Just as they support you, isn't it fair that you support them?"

**4. Who can provide more help?** Discuss with the employee which colleagues can make his job easier. After he lists a few, say, "Great. Let's talk to them about chipping in more. Let's also think about how you can chip in for them."

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# Offer quality feedback

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Providing employees feedback is one of your most important jobs. But as you probably know, feedback can range from off-the-cuff snarky comments that alienate workers and dampen morale, to well-thought-out constructive criticism that encourages employees to improve.

Here are three tips to improve your feedback:

- Attach expectations, specific deadlines, and concrete action items when you assign a task? No matter how insignificant the task, make sure your employees know exactly what you want them to do and by when.

- Offer feedback objectively

without inserting your biases? Or do you tailor your feedback based on how you feel about an employee? For example, have you ever withheld praise from an employee you don't like? Or softened criticism for an employee you do like?

- Do you set clear standards for evaluating performance—and do you apply them consistently? In other words, does everyone know exactly what they need to do to meet expectations? And are those expectations the same for everyone—or do some people get a pass?

You should have answered a resounding "Yes" for all three questions. If you couldn't it's time to make some changes.



## Keep It Legal

### Lost the window office? Sorry, that's not retaliation.

When Michael didn't land a coveted promotion, he sued for race bias. Months later, his employer reorganized the office space. Michael lost his window office, as did several others. He added retaliation to his lawsuit, but the court tossed out that idea. It said merely losing a window wasn't enough of an adverse action to be deemed retaliation, especially if others suffered the same fate. (*Lopez v. Technical Concepts*)

**The takeaway:** After employees file discrimination complaints, they'll be hypersensitive to any slights that could trigger additional claims of retaliation. Fortunately, courts don't always buy it.

### Survey: Employees do fear retaliation.

Minor employee relations problems can explode into lawsuits if employees don't feel safe to voice complaints. A new CareerBuilder survey says employees who decided not to report harassing incidents did so because they didn't want to be labeled a troublemaker (40%), said it was their word against the other person (22%) or were afraid of losing their jobs (18%). Make clear to employees that complaints are welcome and won't cause any retaliation.

**Unfair vs. illegal.** Illinois postal worker Mary sued for sex discrimination, claiming her supervisor gave coveted overtime hours to male friends, not to her. But the evidence in court showed that the supervisor passed over males and females equally. So the court dismissed the case, concluding that unfair doesn't always equal illegal. (*Greene v. Potter*)

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# Parent power

## The skills of raising children often can transfer well for a boss in the workplace

Becoming a parent obviously changes one's personal life. However, the effects of such a monumental event often extend beyond the home front and into the office.

At this time of year when we celebrate Mother's Day and Father's Day, here's a look at how the process of raising children may influence your thoughts and actions as a manager:

### Focusing on results

Juggling multiple professional and familial demands and wanting to "be there" for your kids creates a desire to guard time from slipping away.

"I need to be 'ruthlessly efficient' while in the office as I have less time to get my work done physically sitting in my office chair," says Amanda Ponzar, chief marketing officer for Community Health Charities. "I can no longer be the first in the office and the last to leave, nor can I spend my day chatty-chatting and making the rounds going from office to office to catch up and turning work into social hour."

Ponzar also notes parenthood has increased her awareness that all employees have lives outside of the office and has boosted her commitment to working with staff on flexible schedules.

"Getting the work done is what matters," Ponzar stresses. "Learning that it's about the results not the hours is important for all managers who are dealing not only with different employees but also an increasingly virtual workforce spread out across the country or the world."

### Limiting micromanagement

In a similar vein, managers often find they have less time and energy to oversee their employees' every move. Furthermore, leaders may come to rec-



ognize the value of backing off.

"Kids help you learn to allow for mistakes," says Peter Dudley, an author and former manager at Wells Fargo. "You get used to letting your children try things on their own . . . and fail. Your job is to ensure a safe environment, provide opportunity to grow, and help your child recover from and learn from mistakes. If you're constantly doing everything for your children, they never learn to do for themselves. If you're micromanaging your employees, you never let their creativity and imagination loose to improve the team."

### Communicating effectively

Though those encounters with headstrong 2-year-olds or temperamental teenagers might be aspects of parenthood you'd rather forget, some leaders consider them learning opportunities.

"It took me many years to figure out that speaking to my children in a normal voice and communicating my desires clearly was much more effective than screaming at them, scaring them, or shaming them," says Adam Cole, co-director of the Grant Park Academy of the Arts. "While I did not always get

their compliance, I got it more often, and each interaction after that was more likely to be a conversation than sullen silence."

Cole has extended this approach to the workplace. "Trying to find the most reasonable way to ask someone to do what needs to be done, and letting them know clearly what is at stake and what could be lost as a result of inaction, makes them partners and not victims of the boss. It engages their sense of value and inspires initiative rather than resistance."

### Recognizing differences

Remaining fair and impartial benefits both managers and parents, but so does factoring individuality into the equation.

"Parenthood has made me more aware of everyone's different personalities and learning styles," says Perryn Olson, marketing director at My IT. "I have two young daughters that couldn't be more different personality-wise. You can't treat everyone on your team the same way; some need more instructions, others more check-ins, and some more discipline—just like parenting siblings."

### Maintaining composure

Finally, don't underestimate the power of parenthood on your ability to tackle tough situations in the office.

As noted by Jennifer Folsom, chief of corporate development at Summit Consulting, "I can handle anything. I mean seriously, I'm the mom of three boys; there's nothing you can say or do that will freak me out. Because of that, when senior leadership meetings get tense I can put my mom hat on and say, 'OK, everyone, deep breath; it's all going to be fine. Let's break this problem down into small pieces.'"

# Q&A

## Instructors idle between classes: Pay them?

**Q** We run a fitness club. Instructors often have down time between classes, which they can spend however they want, on or off the premises. Do we have to pay them for this time?

**A** No, as long as the instructors are truly completely relieved of their work responsibilities. A word of caution: If instructors perform work that benefits the employer during those break hours (e.g., cleaning up the room, etc.), that may indeed be compensable time, whether they are required to do the work or not.

## How can I discipline exempt staff for poor work without breaking the law?

**Q** Some of our exempt employees aren't performing up to standards. How can I discipline them since their salaries aren't dependent on how many hours they work?

**A** As long as you don't dock pay from an exempt employee, you are free to take disciplinary action whenever their performance isn't up to snuff. With certain exceptions, exempt employees are entitled to their full weekly salaries in any workweek in which they perform work, regardless of variations in the quality and quantity of the work performed.

## We made worker stay late to clean mess: Do we need to pay him overtime?

**Q** One of our workers made a mess near the end of his shift. We told him he needed to clean it up before he left. Do we need to pay him overtime?

**A** You can discipline him for making a mess, but you must pay him time and a half for all hours worked in excess of 40 per week, even if he "volunteers" to put in the extra time to make things right. Never accept "free" labor.

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# The Breakroom

**A boss should never use his or her team as a support group.** Don't seek solace or solutions about your financial, marital or other personal problems from your employees. Doing so will leave you vulnerable and will give staff the impression that if you don't have a handle on your private life, you don't have a handle on matters in the workplace either.

**When you schedule a job candidate for an interview, make sure your receptionist is in on the welcome too.** He or she is the first impression your company needs to make to ensure a candidate feels the warmth. A greeting like, "Good morning, Heather, we're so glad to have you here today. Please have a seat and I'll tell Mr. Smith you're here," will set the tone for a positive experience.



"You can see the difficult position I'm in, Dale: Your performance has slipped steadily since 2014, but frankly, we don't have anyone else who sends around such terrific puppy GIFs."

# GOSSIP, RUMORS & WORKPLACE BUSYBODIES: HOW TO PROMOTE POSITIVE CO-WORKER COMMUNICATION

Gossip, Rumors &  
Workplace Busybodies

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DAILY

**Destructive effects of gossip and grapevine rumors can undermine performance and damage working relationships.** When toxic talk infects an entire department, managers may be tempted to throw up their hands and just give in. They often feel powerless to counteract the damage caused by disparaging comments and persistent negativity, believing that “you can’t change human nature.”

But tolerating these harmful behaviors is definitely NOT the best solution.

To help you take back control, *Administrative Professional Today* teamed up with workplace guru and syndicated columnist Marie McIntyre to help you successfully defuse the negative impact of gossip, rumors and workplace busybodies.

## **Promote workplace positivity! In this fast-paced 75-minute recording, you’ll discover:**

- The specific signs that your office has a problem with negative chatter
- How managers may inadvertently encourage negative behaviors
- The best way to deal with tattletales, drama queens, whiners and bullies
- How you can make gossip and the grapevine work in your favor
- Six rules for dealing with the problem of negative talkers
- When the rumor mill will always heat up and what to do about it
- The 7 topics that everyone should avoid at the office
- The importance of management communication during high-change periods
- How to stop discussing “attitude” and start focusing on behavior
- The power of high expectations, sincere praise and clear consequences
- A simple roadmap for conducting an effective two-way coaching discussion
- Techniques to use when employees blame others or deny responsibility
- What to do when coaching doesn’t work
- Conducting a “team turnaround” to involve your group in solving the problem
- Plus much more!

*(Over, please)*



## About Your Speaker:

**Marie G. McIntyre, Ph.D.**, has more than 20 years' experience as a manager, business owner and the HR director at a Fortune 500 company. She's authored two business books, writes a nationwide newspaper weekly advice column and is founder of YourOfficeCoach.com. Her coaching clients include The Home Depot, Tyson Foods, Panasonic, AT&T, Cisco and other major organizations.

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