

Employee Matters: Ask the Expert

Ask the Expert is a monthly column published in the Employee Matters newsletter authored by experts from across the University and focused on common workplace challenges. Please find archived columns below this month's column.



December 2024 | Author: Sarah Klaper, University Ombudsperson

Q: I am a new manager at Northwestern who supervises several staff. One staff member has been in this office for years. When I started, people told me that she was fantastic. I have not found this to be the case. This employee seems to run amok doing random tasks and not focused on doing what we really need her to do.

A: I am intrigued by the challenges you are having with your staff member. If you haven't done so already, I suggest speaking with each of your employees individually to discuss what they are currently doing as well as what they want to do. It is also important to share your expectations for their roles. Management changes can be tough for staff because a manager's expectations might be completely different from their predecessor's.

In addition, it could be helpful to lay out your vision for your department and ask for some staff feedback. Then, let them know you will speak with them individually in the context of this vision and the direction you need them to take moving forward. It is highly likely that a previous manager had good reason to task your employee with different things, and the employee just didn't understand that expectations had changed. Once you are clear about the department's needs, your employee can see how she can grow into this new role.

Keep a couple things in mind before you move forward. First, change is **difficult** for many people. Make it clear that you want to hear your staff's feedback and concerns. You might learn valuable information about the culture and processes at Northwestern (or in your area) that require you to make tweaks or build relationships for your plan to be effective. You might also learn where you have some staff reluctance that will require you to ask some additional questions. If you can help them address the "why," you will have better staff buy-in to a shared vision.

Second, be mindful of job descriptions and position classifications. If you have major departmental changes in mind, it would be most helpful for you to consult with your local HR and/or HR Business Partner about your vision before making the changes. Your vision for roles and duties might require a reclassification or a new position to be created entirely to move forward.

If you still have challenges, consult with HR and the ombudsperson about other ways you can work through issues with this valued employee.

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November 2024 | Author: Karin Schmidt, Director, HR Business Partners

Q: I am a staff member and some events impacting my personal life have triggered extreme stress. I desperately need to take a day off, but I'd like to keep my situation private, and I don't want my manager to think that this is just an excuse for me to take an unplanned vacation day. What do I need to tell my manager to take a mental health day?

A: Prioritizing your mental health is important and a valid use of your Incidental Sick Time (IST or "sick days"). When notifying your manager that you need to take a sick day, you are not required to provide any private details or personal health information. It is important that you follow your department's procedures for notifying your manager or team that you will be out and providing them with as much advance notice as possible. If you are unsure about your department's request and notification procedures for planned or unplanned absences, talk to your manager. To learn more about IST, [view the webpage](#).

If you need to be out for more than one day for any health reason, notify them each day that you will be out and when you think you may be returning. If you need to be out for more than seven calendar days, you should [view the Extended Sick Time webpage](#) to explore your options and eligibility for Northwestern's leave programs such as FMLA or Extended Sick Time (EST). If you need to request a reasonable accommodation to perform your job's essential functions, [contact the Office of Civil Rights and Title IX Compliance](#) (OCR). Your personal health information is confidential.

In addition, Northwestern's [Employee Assistance Program \(EAP\)](#) offers resources to support your mental health and well-being, such as 10 free and confidential counseling sessions (per life issues that arise), Mindstream, Textcoach Therapy, Digital Support Groups, and more.

October 2024 | Author: Sarah Klaper, University Ombudsperson

Q: My staff is uncooperative. When I announce an initiative or give a directive, they always want to discuss it. My response is that "I am the manager. Just follow directions." I don't have time for it, nor do I feel I need to justify my decisions to them. When my boss sets an expectation, I just do it. What am I doing wrong?

A: Yes, we all work differently with our managers. However, I am curious as to why you hesitate to discuss the background with your staff. Perhaps you are concerned about abdicating authority or being seen as weak if you share how decisions are made.

Meaningful transparency in decision making is an essential component of good leadership. It increases respect and belief in both a manager and the organization. Sharing the "why" behind a decision does not mean going into every detail or allowing for a vote. Instead, sharing relevant information helps your team understand the context and to accept the decision, even if they disagree.

For example, you could tell your team, "I know that we all hoped to run the full project this year. However, budget constraints are going to prevent us from doing X, Y, Z. We will have to stick with A, B, C and complete the rest of the project next year." That simple explanation acknowledges the team's interests

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(you saw and heard them) and provides the rationale. Ultimately, it helps them to accept the decision as being well thought out, even if they would have made a different choice.

Making time for a conversation might actually save your bacon! The team might add insight into costs or resources you didn't anticipate. They could also be mistaken and you can clear up misperceptions. Or, maybe the long-term costs are not as important because the funds simply don't exist today so you still need to go with your plan.

Sharing information and being open to discussion demonstrates that you value your team's input, builds trust, encourages effective problem solving, and team collaboration. In the end, it will help you shine as a leader.

September 2024 | Author: Karin Schmidt, Director, HR Business Partners

Q: Can you help me understand my role regarding our medical/parental leave process for employees?

A: Please visit our website for [Staff Medical/Parental Leave Do's & Don'ts for Managers](#).

July 2024 | Author: Sarah Klaper, University Ombudsperson

Q: I am a supervisor, and staff member A just came to me about the behavior of staff member B. The behavior that A is describing is terrible. I really want to give B a piece of my mind and write them up so that they know their behavior was completely unacceptable.

A: Moderating disputes between two colleagues is one of the hardest challenges facing a supervisor. I'm glad you took a beat to think it through instead of rushing to chastise B. Before you rush to judgment, have you spoken to B to hear their perspective? The person who comes to you first is not necessarily always "right" or providing all the context necessary to assess the situation.

You could first let A know you heard their concern, you appreciate they brought it to you, and you'll address the situation. Ask them if they have any thoughts on how it could best be resolved

Then, have a 1:1 meeting with B and let them know you heard about the situation with A. Ask their perspective on what happened and how things got to this point. They could provide you with context that would be important in resolving the situation. Was there a misunderstanding or miscommunication? Or was the whole thing provoked by A (from B's perspective)?

If the issue is just B's behavior, let them know it doesn't meet your expectations in this workplace. Instead, you expect that in similar situations, they will respond [describe desired behavior]. Be specific so they are clear on what you want from them. If the situation rises to a higher level of concern, it might be time to loop in your own supervisor, your local HR person, and/or your HR Business Partner for their guidance.

Finally, if the situation is really based on a misunderstanding or miscommunication, is it possible for A & B to sit down and talk it through? They could do that on their own; they could do that with you as their

supervisor there to guide the conversation; or they could mediate the situation with my office or with OIDI's Mediation, Conflict Resolution, and Restorative Practices Initiative.

June 2024 | Author: Karin Schmidt, Director, HR Business Partners

Q: Much to my surprise, one of my team members has applied for a position in another department and would like me to be a reference. Besides looking into getting them more money, what else can I do to retain them?

A: Your surprise suggests that you haven't been having career discussions with them. Before scrambling to figure out how to retain them, think about why they would apply for this position. Chances are, it's a professional development opportunity, which is what we want for all our staff. We lose people who don't feel like they have opportunities to grow here -- a great performer who wants to stay and expand their career at the University is a benefit for the institution.

A wonderful manager of mine once told me, "I will always fully support you leaving this team to grow and flourish in your career, but I would feel terrible if you left because you weren't getting the support you needed from me."

Moving forward, I recommend dedicating time to learning about each of your team member's professional goals, making it comfortable for them to share their career objectives, and asking how you can support them.