

FORETHOUGHT FRONTLINE WORKERS

Supervisor Work/Life Training Gets Results

by Ellen Ernst Kossek and Leslie B. Hammer

Reprint [F0811G](#)

Supervisor Work/Life Training Gets Results

by Ellen Ernst Kossek and Leslie B. Hammer

Teaching managers to be more supportive of their direct reports' work/life issues can be a simple and effective route to improving employee health and satisfaction, according to our multiyear study of hundreds of frontline workers and dozens of supervisors in middle-America supermarkets.

Supervisors are eager for such help: Many want to be supportive, but with companies cutting training budgets, they haven't been taught basic management skills. Worse, it's common for firms to reward supervisors for making their numbers, regardless of the human cost. That's a particularly shortsighted policy when it comes to low-wage workers, many of whom struggle with family and personal needs and may not see eye-to-eye with their managers on the primacy of work.

To increase supervisors' sensitivity to—and ability to handle—employees' work/life issues, we ran small sessions on how to plan coverage and deal with employees' scheduling conflicts. They consisted of onetime, self-paced 30-to-45-minute computer tutorials followed by 75-minute face-to-face discussions. The training focused on four kinds of actions: *providing emotional support*—that is, acknowledging employees' sometimes extensive responsibilities outside work; *providing structural support* by working with employees ahead of time to resolve scheduling conflicts; *modeling healthful behavior* by, for example, showing that it is acceptable to occasionally attend important family functions during work hours; and *partnering with other managers* to strategically address work/life issues through initiatives like interdepartmental cross-training, which increases coverage options.

Our study showed that prior to the training, employees who perceived their managers as unsupportive had significantly worse job attitudes, blood pressure, heart rates, sleep quality, and general overall health, and were less likely to be with the company a year later. After supervisors went through the training, workers' perceptions that their supervisors were supportive on work/life issues had

improved significantly. This had important additional consequences in employee health, satisfaction, and safety.

Once they viewed their managers as being more supportive, employees reported improvements in general overall health as measured by such factors as pain and psychological problems. This effect was most pronounced among employees who previously had the highest levels of work/life conflict—for example, a frequent need to change their hours to accommodate children's schedules.

Employees of the trained supervisors also were more satisfied in their jobs than a control group of workers whose managers did not undergo training. The employees of the trained supervisors had a lower inclination to seek jobs elsewhere than the control group and reported a greater willingness to comply with safety programs.

To reinforce the training and ensure that it was implemented, we asked all trained supervisors to set individual goals for using what they had learned (for example, increasing the number of times they asked employees about their families or scheduling needs). We also asked them to record their supportive behaviors on index cards for the next few weeks. After this stage of the training, a perceptual gap between managers and employees had closed: Before the training, one-third of employees had rated their managers as much less supportive than the managers rated themselves, but afterward, the ratings were in close agreement for most trained pairs.

Both the training and the follow-up initiatives were simple and inexpensive—but they paid off handsomely by improving employee motivation and decreasing the risk of costly health problems. The study provides proof that small interventions can have a big impact throughout an organization.

Ellen Ernst Kossek (kossek@msu.edu) is a professor of human resource management and organizational behavior at Michigan State University's School of Labor & Industrial Relations in East Lansing and a coauthor of *CEO of Me: Creating a Life in the Flexible Job Age* (Wharton

School Publishing, 2008). **Leslie B. Hammer** (hammerl@pdx.edu) is a professor of psychology at Portland State University in Oregon and a coauthor of *Working Couples Caring for Children and Aging Parents* (LEA Press, 2007). Kossek and Hammer codirect the Center for Work-Family Stress, Safety, and Health in Portland. For more on their research, see <http://wfsupport.psy.pdx.edu> and <http://ellenkossek.lir.msu.edu/>.

Reprint [F0811G](#)

To order, see the next page

or call 800-988-0886 or 617-783-7500

or go to www.hbr.org

Further Reading

The *Harvard Business Review* Paperback Series

Here are the landmark ideas—both contemporary and classic—that have established *Harvard Business Review* as required reading for businesspeople around the globe. Each paperback includes eight of the leading articles on a particular business topic. The series includes over thirty titles, including the following best-sellers:

[Harvard Business Review on Brand Management](#)

Product no. 1445

[Harvard Business Review on Change](#)

Product no. 8842

[Harvard Business Review on Leadership](#)

Product no. 8834

[Harvard Business Review on Managing People](#)

Product no. 9075

[Harvard Business Review on Measuring Corporate Performance](#)

Product no. 8826

For a complete list of the *Harvard Business Review* paperback series, go to www.hbr.org.

Harvard Business Review

To Order

For *Harvard Business Review* reprints and subscriptions, call 800-988-0886 or 617-783-7500. Go to www.hbr.org

For customized and quantity orders of *Harvard Business Review* article reprints, call 617-783-7626, or e-mail customizations@hbsp.harvard.edu