

1. “What can an employee do when work culture issues amongst employees are hidden and underhanded that the supervisor refuses to acknowledge there is a work culture issue (dismissive when brought directly to supervisor’s attention) and higher administration (HR, director, etc.) relies upon supervisor’s perspective. With the restrictions of COVID-19, staff meetings are not held in person. Everything is on telehealth so interpersonal dynamics are not observable...”

I am hearing two issues in this question. First, it sounds like the “aggressive” employees are careful to shield much of their problem behavior from view when the supervisor is present. This is certainly a challenge to interdiction of problematic work unit dynamics. But the larger, more challenging issue, from the framework of the workshop (i.e. that the supervisor is often the only one who can effect a change in problematic workgroup dynamics) is that it sounds like your supervisor and your HR dept. doesn’t want to see or know about this workgroup issues. If they knew about them, they might feel compelled to do their job and do something about them. I am afraid I don’t have a good answer for authority figures not doing their job. Until the people in authority recognize the issue staff are complaining about, nothing likely will change.

2. Is it possible for a supervisor to be a freerider? Or “checked out” because close to retirement?

Yes, of course this is possible; and in this case, much of the limit setting and intervening to promote direct communication vs. triangulation will not occur. However, the more common issue I have seen is incompetence in the role. Not everyone is cut out to be a supervisor. In 1969, Lawrence Peter wrote a hilarious, semi - tongue in cheek management book called “The Peter Principle” where he posited the idea that in the corporate world people tend to rise and get promoted to the “level of their own incompetence”. He says where they likely were competent in lower level positions, at a certain point of the career ladder, the demands of their role is too big for the talents/capacity that they bring to the job. If you think about supervisors in the human service field, they get promoted likely because they were competent and gifted clinicians. But that doesn’t mean they know much about supervision / management, nor have any particular aptitude for it. The frameworks and methods I discussed in the presentation today, sound simple and straightforward, but not everyone has the awareness to diagnose these dynamics or the skill to effectively set the limits discussed in an equanimous and non-punitive way. We would like to believe our leaders are competent, but just like any employee role, their abilities can vary widely.