

Playing Favorites



By Cathy Cassata

Liking certain people more than others is natural. However, as a manager, avoiding favoritism toward staff members is crucial. Unfortunately, not every manager abides by this rule. A study conducted at Central Michigan University found that 47% of American employees reported that their supervisor had favorites, and 21% admitted that their supervisor treated them better than their peers at work.¹

Karen Michael, an employment attorney specializing in workplace training and investigations, notes that everyone has biases toward people due to life experiences and what they see in media. “Studies show that we immediately judge people, evaluate them, and make opinions. It takes a minute for our unconscious brain to process and evaluate [those thoughts],” she says. “The risk is that managers make decisions based on that unconscious brain instead of thinking through whether a decision is based on bias.”

Researchers of the Central Michigan University study developed the following list of behaviors connected to favoritism¹:

- Praising, supporting, and socializing with certain employees more than others
- Providing better opportunities, more desired tasks, and more frequent and timely feedback to certain employees
- Considering the suggestions of only certain employees and not others
- Giving important work-related information to certain people
- Excusing unproductive behavior and allowing individuals to get away with actions that other employees would be reprimanded for

Having favorite staff members is something Debbie Siclari, CMA (AAMA), works hard to avoid. As a medical assistant for 37 years and practice manager for 25, she has learned ways to ensure all staff feel like they are treated equally. “I’m friendly, but I try [to] keep my relationship with staff strictly professional because I have to be able to separate myself from them,” she says.

While Siclari engages in small talk with staff and checks in on them when they return

to work after being sick or addressing a personal issue, she sets boundaries. “I’m not connected to them on social media or anything outside the [practice] except attending work holiday parties,” says Siclari.

Early in her career as a manager, she used to buy a birthday cake and balloons for staff members, but over time, it became time-consuming, and she feared favoritism. “I liked making each person feel special, but it became hard to keep up with because, if I did it for one person, I’d have to do it for everyone,” she explains. The physicians at her practice decided that instead of cake and balloons, each staff member would get a small birthday bonus in their paycheck.

If Siclari gives an end-of-year holiday gift, she gives each staff member something small. “Everyone gets the same exact thing; no one is getting anything more or different,” says Siclari.

She practices the same mentality regarding performance reviews, ensuring no one gets more or less time for the review. When it comes to complaints from staff about other staff members using work time for personal things like talking on the phone or brows-

avorites?



Avoid Favoritism in the Workplace by Treating All Employees Equally

ing the internet, she addresses the issues with the whole group. “I don’t name names, and I put it out as a general request to the staff to watch their cell phone and internet usage,” says Siclari. “This keeps them from feeling targeted.” If the situation escalates, she addresses it with them one-on-one.

Breaking Down Bias

While giving a staff member more praise or more desired work tasks because of favoritism is unethical, it is not illegal. The United States does not have laws specifically addressing workplace favoritism. However, regulations exist to protect workers when favoritism progresses to the following illegal behaviors, according to the Vaughn Law Firm in Decatur, Georgia²:

- Discriminating against employees for their gender, race, national origin, color, age, disability, or religion
- Chastising staff for not tolerating verbal, physical, emotional, or sexual harassment
- Retaliating against employees when

they file complaints or organize a union drive

- Violating company policies or employment contract terms

A 2023 workplace discrimination poll conducted by the online recruiting company Monster found that 91% of respondents reported that they have faced workplace discrimination.³

Siclari has had to address concerns for a staff member who lives with a disability. “They had 30 years of experience of being a medical assistant and are qualified for the job. However, the [other] staff had a hard time adjusting to them,” she says.

Siclari engaged in private conversations with the other staff about accommodating the staff member and being tolerant. She also referred to the human resources department regarding how to legally and appropriately address the employee’s work performance. “I would have conversations about their shortfalls or not performing at an expected level when it comes to certain tasks, never pointing to the disability,” she says. “We are continuing to work together

to iron out performance.”

She became familiar with the Americans with Disabilities Act, which prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities and guarantees equal opportunities for them in employment, transportation, public accommodations, state and local government services, and telecommunications.⁴

Four other federal laws protect individuals with disabilities from discrimination in employment and the job application process:

- **The Rehabilitation Act** authorizes funding for various disability-related purposes and activities, including state vocational rehabilitation programs, independent living programs, training and research, and the work of the National Council on Disability.
- ...
- **The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act** consolidates federal job training and employment programs, including employment and training services for adults, dislocated workers, and youth and Wagner-Peyser employment services administered by the Department of Labor; and adult education and literacy

programs and Vocational Rehabilitation programs for individuals with disabilities administered by the Department of Education.

...

- **The Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act** requires employers that have federal contracts or subcontracts entered into before December 1, 2003, of \$25,000 or more and/or federal contracts or subcontracts entered into on or after December 1, 2003, of \$100,000 or more to provide equal employment opportunities for certain veterans with disabilities.
- **The Civil Service Reform Act**, which covers most federal agencies, contains several rules designed to promote fairness in federal personnel actions and prohibit discrimination against applicants and employees with disabilities.⁴

Consequences of Favoritism

A study from Central Michigan University found that employees believe favoritism in the workplace has the following negative consequences¹:

- Displays workplace injustice and unfairness
- Brings about negative feelings about the organization and inspires less loyalty to the company
- Increases emotional exhaustion
- Encourages less job satisfaction, stronger intentions to quit the job, and less work motivation
- Weakens work relationships with leaders
- Results in unfavored staff receiving less support, recognition, and professional help (e.g., mentoring and coaching from their supervisor)
- Decreases trust in supervisors

Righting Wrongoings

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects individuals against employment discrimination based on race, as well as national origin, color, sex, or religion. It covers the full spectrum of employment decisions, including recruitment, selections, terminations, and other decisions concerning terms and conditions of employment.⁵

Siclari says attending training and workshops over the years has helped her stay in tune with the topic and enhance her skills as a practice manager. "I also complete continuing education through the AAMA, which covers a lot and keeps me up to date on issues related to clinical and administrative responsibilities in the office and personnel issues related specifically to managing staff," she says.

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) offers information on discrimination and harassment on its website: www.eeoc.gov. It also recommends the following ways to prevent racial discrimination in the workplace:

- Respect cultural and racial differences in the workplace.
- Be professional in conduct and speech.
- Refuse to initiate, participate, or condone discrimination and harassment.
- Avoid race-based or culturally offensive humor or pranks. When in doubt, leave it outside the workplace.
- Familiarize yourself with the company's workplace policies and act responsibly.
- Attend training on [equal employment opportunity] principles and learn about your legal rights and responsibilities under the anti-discrimination laws.
- ...
- Report incidents of inappropriate, discriminatory, harassing, or abusive behavior to your supervisor, human resources department, union, or management.
- If you experience or witness discrimination or harassment, contact EEOC or your local human rights commission.⁶

Evening the Scales

Stop workplace discrimination and favoritism by employing strategies that practice

managers can use:

Foster an environment that encourages responsible bystanders. A majority (77%) of workers stated that they have witnessed an act of workplace discrimination, but 28% felt uncomfortable reporting the incident, according to the Monster poll.³

The Office of Congressional Workplace Rights (OCWR) suggests giving employees the tools they need to be responsible bystanders. This includes developing practice standards of conduct and policies that outline clear expectations for behavior and potential disciplinary actions for violating those standards. Moreover, workplaces must apply the policies consistently and immediately act when problems are reported. By having a fair process available to address workplace incidents, OCWR states that employees will be more likely to intervene.⁷

Instill a monthly culture check-in that encourages staff to submit feedback or observations anonymously, creating an early alert system for any concerns around favoritism or bias within the team.

"This kind of open channel shows that managers take staff input seriously and builds a stronger, more trusting workplace," says Connie Kurczewski, a medical practice management consultant and founder of Elevated Practice Consulting.

Conduct quarterly self-checks. Managers wanting to ensure fairness and spot unintentional biases within themselves can start with a quarterly self-check that involves setting aside time to review decisions, such as who is getting key assignments, how feedback is given, and any patterns in scheduling, advises Kurczewski. "Adding peer feedback or anonymous input from team members also gives them valuable outside perspective to make adjustments where needed," she says.

Ask employees for specific input on equity and inclusion. Through his own experience as a Black man, Henry Lukenge, president and CEO at Nexim Healthcare Consultants, has witnessed how systems of oppression and exclusion, such as discrimination and favoritism, undermine talent and progress. "It is important for managers to center the needs and voices of the marginalized by providing the opportunity for

What to Do

If you are a bystander to workplace discrimination that does not involve someone you manage and you are unsure what to do, the Office of Congressional Workplace Rights (OCWR) suggests taking the following actions⁷:

- Write down notes about the behavior you witnessed with details like the date and what you saw and heard.
- If you feel comfortable, tell the victim you are willing to describe the incident if there is an investigation.
- If you see the behavior continue, stay near the victim in hopes of preventing it from escalating.
- If you do not feel comfortable addressing the situation with the victim or culprit, follow your employer's internal procedures for reporting incidents. If there is not a procedure, speak with a neutral supervisor.
- Contact OCWR for help at 202/724-9250.

those staff to provide feedback on the issue of equity and inclusion,” he says.

To address discrimination, he recommends managers seek feedback on the impacts of their actions and mistakes, take responsibility, and seek to correct these mistakes through learning, unlearning, and relearning. Managers should not invalidate the voices of those impacted by the manager's behavior, which would be unethical.

Implement trainings that include relatable, everyday scenarios. Real examples, like patient interactions or handling feedback with colleagues, help team members better understand how to uphold fairness. “Revisiting these training sessions twice a year keeps the message relevant and reinforces that it's a core part of the culture,” says Kurczewski.

Training should also focus on inclusion and not pit people against one another, notes Michael. “We can find much more

that we have in common than differences. The key is to set expectations and create an environment where people feel comfortable and confident to express ideas and be authentic,” she says.

Implement a civility policy and robust code of conduct. Civility policies should require that all employees engage in conduct that is respectful, professional, and collaborative and does not tolerate demeaning, intimidating, or insensitive behavior, asserts Michael. She notes that a client of hers has a policy that prohibits conduct that undermines team cohesion, staff morale, individual self-worth, productivity, or safety.

“Too often, organizations tolerate bullying-type behaviors,” she says. “The reality is that we think things in our head ... [but] we can control our actions and words. Organizations should focus on [intentionally] creating policies that set expectations for workplace conduct, train them on those

expectations, and then hold employees accountable for violations.”

Hold an open-door review period once or twice a year that lets employees share feedback on management practices without any fear of repercussions.

“Reviewing and adjusting policies based on team input not only keeps them relevant but also shows employees that the organization is serious about creating an equitable workplace,” says Kurczewski. ✦

The CE test for this article can be found on page 28.



References

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