Can you give me quick tips on giving feedback to employees, specifically, how to respond to their defensiveness and what to say or not say in response that will increase the likelihood of their finally accepting what I have to say?

Feedback is more complex than it first appears. Not only is there a process for giving feedback, but there is also a bit of art to responding to defensiveness. Most employees do not relish constructive criticism, despite its value, so listen calmly to what your employee has to say and be understanding. With empathy, say, “I understand your point.” Receptiveness to feedback (or something akin to it) is then likely to follow, helped by your noninterference with the venting process. Do not equate defensiveness with denial or complete rejection. After all, your feedback is truthful. What follows is likely to be your employee’s asking, “Can you explain more about what you mean?” This is an indication that acceptance is near. Your goal is not 100% agreement with your feedback but agreement that your feedback includes things to be considered. That’s a win. For more tips on providing feedback to employees, visit www.myimpactsolution.com and check out the article for managers titled “Giving Feedback.”

Regarding diversity in the workplace, what is the purpose of educating employees to understand the cultural norms of foreign-born employees while training employees from other countries in the expectations of the cultural norms in the USA?

When training foreign-born, new workers to understand American customs, you will not eliminate manners of communication to which they are accustomed. And frankly, that is not the goal of diversity awareness. Although you will not expect your American employees to adopt or practice the cultural norms of another country, educating them about what they are reduces the likelihood of improper statements, harassment, miscommunication, tension, and impersonal comments or questions that foul relationships between workers. So education works both ways. Body language, for example, varies widely among different cultures. Without some awareness training of your employees, how might they react, for example, to a coworker who does not smile back when greeted? For an interesting review of issues regarding personal space, touch, tone of voice, eye contact, silence, facial control, and feedback, check out some of the resources at DiversityCouncil.org.
Certainly there is nothing wrong with teaching your employees assertiveness skills. The depth to which you explore this subject, however, may touch on or generate psychology-related discussions. And there is nothing wrong with that either. It’s important not to wander into diagnosing employees or their intrapsychic issues associated with resistance to being assertive. Refer such matters to the EAP via self-referral. Also, be aware that it’s tempting to analyze people and consider or explore their psychology. We all do it, but as a supervisor, you possess significant authority, and employees won’t easily reject your attempts to drill down and ask personal questions or explore their personal issues. So proceed with awareness and avoid wandering into counseling and diagnostic discussions.  

Yes, the EAP can help. You are describing a lack of basic skills and know-how, but additional issues you touch on are worth examining. These include anxiety, fear, and insecurity about participating in the supervisory role. All these issues are probably surmountable, but “book knowledge” may be only part of your solution. The personal issues may interfere with your ability to apply whatever you learn. There may be certain skills that are more difficult to learn than others. These may point to a need for counseling or perhaps coaching by another supervisor with the experience to assist you. The EAP can lead you to information about the supervisor role but also help you not undermine whatever you learn. There are many ways to acquire the material you seek online or through books and possibly courses. As you improve your ability to manage workers, the EAP can help you tackle periodic roadblocks to success and job satisfaction. Visit www.myimpactsolution.com for resources such as articles and seminars regarding building leadership skills.