

The Frontline Supervisor



Quality Employee Assistance Programs.

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Q. The EAP notified me that an employee I referred is not following through with its recommendations. The employee signed a release, but there are no disciplinary issues. Is there any reason to meet with the employee, even though I can't discuss the personal problem?

A. Yes. Sit down with your employee. Explain that you are in this meeting not to discuss any personal business related to the EAP referral, but to address the performance or conduct matter that led to the referral in the first place. Your expectation is the resolution of that problem or concern regardless of follow-through at the EAP. Let your employee know what the consequences are for a continuation of the problem, and encourage him or her to reconsider participation in the EAP along with its recommendations. Follow up and meet with your employee in the weeks ahead to reinforce any successful work performance or address any return to the performance issue. Whether you refer to the EAP again (if problems return) would be up to you, but talk with the EAP if that happens.

Q. We hired an employee who was recently paroled from prison after being incarcerated for a few years. Can I refer the employee to the EAP to be interviewed and assessed for any risk issues?

A. The EAP would not meet with an employee for this purpose because it is beyond the scope of EAP practice. The employee could self-refer to the EAP for any reason, of course, and you could refer the employee (like any other employee) for performance issues, but meeting with the EAP to help management better gauge the employment decision would be impermissible. Such a practice would damage the program's ability to attract self-referrals, because it would be seen by the workforce as intimidating. Your new employee has a parole officer, and the court has a discharge plan. The court takes responsibility for a parolee's assessment, release, and suitability for work. This often includes communication with the employer. EAPs promote their confidentiality and their reputation as a safe and helpful resource, and when this perception is eroded, risk to the organization will increase because some employees may shy away.

Q. My employee is in pain when he bends over or gets out of a chair. We avoid giving additional assignments to him. This is a medical issue, so is an EAP referral appropriate? My assistant has a great arthritis doctor, and we were thinking about giving this employee the physician's phone number.

A. There are several reasons to consider recommending that your employee visit with the EAP. These include the EAP providing help with ancillary problems associated with the condition and the workplace, relationship stress in the office, secondary problems the condition has created at home, a need for general support, pursuing ideas the employee may have to help cope with the condition at work (special accommodations, etc.), and other problems still unknown. A good medical practitioner may be needed, of course. Provide this information to the EAP, which will pass it along. The EAP will follow up, offer encouragement, connect with referral sources, and provide ongoing services to help ensure effective treatment or resolution of other problems. This is a good example of how EAPs can help employees with problems that at first glance may not appear to benefit from EAP help.

Q. The spouse of an employee phoned me on Sunday night to say his wife would not be at work the next day because of a car problem. It all seemed rather odd. I recommended this employee visit the EAP in the past for being absent on Mondays. What's my next step to intervene?

A. Many employees will visit the EAP based on a supervisor's recommendation. This usually happens for two reasons: They really have a personal problem and the prompt by the supervisor does the trick to motivate them to get help, or they don't have much of a problem at all, but they go to the EAP because pleasing the supervisor is important to them. Employees with personal problems they would really rather control but not give up, like alcoholism, seek help because of a different set of dynamics. This last possibility may describe your employee and why your earlier recommendation was ignored. Employees with personal problems that affect job performance but offer significant "desirable benefits," like addiction, must be motivated to accept help by the goal of avoiding something they fear. Typically, this is an effective disciplinary action. The question for the supervisor is how long to tolerate repeated performance problems before deciding upon an action that can leverage an employee's desire to seek help.

Q. I am feeling burned out. I am exhausted, apathetic, and frustrated. Should I go to my boss first or visit the EAP for answers on how to get out of this state of mind?

A. Whether you approach your boss or the EAP is your decision, but here is how the EAP can help: 1) Assess the degree to which burnout is affecting your physical health (a medical referral may follow). 2) Identify the ways in which burnout has affected your work-life balance, with the goal of planning a return-to-wellness strategy, particularly with regard to depression. 3) Offer suggestions for intervention strategies outside of work that can help you return to a more fully functioning state of engagement with your organization. 4) Help you examine on-the-job interventions, some of which may require discussion with your boss in order to implement them. 5) Follow up with you to facilitate, monitor, and help you implement your return-to-wellness plan.

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