

# The Frontline Supervisor



Quality Employee Assistance Programs.

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**Q. We have an employee who gets very angry and exhibits rage. Thankfully, his performance is good, but I worry about having to fire him someday. What is the risk of violence if an employee like this is fired?**

A. An examination of workplace violence incidents shows some common patterns. One is an employee's violent response to unexpected termination where, as a result, the employee believed the company or supervisor "ruined" his life. This underscores the importance of working closely with employees in correcting performance, using the EAP, providing regular feedback, and having regular performance reviews. Use performance improvement plans and apply progressive disciplinary steps if ever needed, where each step is accompanied by an alternative to attend the EAP. This leveraging approach can prevent the dismissal of some of the most difficult employees. No one can predict an employee's reaction to termination, but the less sudden and surprising it is to a potentially violent employee, in all probability, the lower the risk of a violent response.

**Q. Three employees went to the EAP in a group to complain about me. Will the EAP take what they say at face value or use whatever is said against me? The employees are all experiencing different performance issues. What do EAPs do in situations like this?**

A. It is not unusual for small groups of employees to visit the EAP to complain about a supervisor. Typically, these cases center on complaints about communication, supervision practices, anger issues, and unfair distribution of work. EAPs view these cases as opportunities to help employees and reduce workplace conflicts that could grow more severe. After a group interview, individual employee interviews typically lead to greater insights about the problem, issues within the group itself, individual employee needs, and unique concerns about each employee's relationship with the supervisor. Recommendations follow. The best outcome is reduced conflicts with the supervisor. For serious issues concerning management practices, the EAP would recommend employees to other internal organizational resources (e.g., human resources, procedures in the company handbook). Be assured that the EAP does not function as a human resources advisor, legal advocate, or business representative, or team up to lead a charge against the supervisor. To do so would damage the EAP's perceived value to supervisors, reduce utilization, and increase risk to the organization.

**Q. Our work unit is participating in a three-part workshop on diversity awareness in a couple of weeks. A few employees are grumbling about being asked to participate, but isn't this training an appropriate business activity?**

A. Your workforce is your organization's most valuable resource. Continuing education, awareness, and training all contribute to helping it maintain its value. Diversity fits this purpose, as would any other topic that could enhance its functioning. That's the business rationale. The 21st-century workplace is increasingly diverse, and where organizations or employees fail to appreciate the business case for diversity, they risk lower profits, conflicts, higher turnover, loss of customer loyalty, and the domino effect from dysfunction that flows from employee biases becoming prejudices that damage morale. Diversity awareness gives organizations a fighting chance to improve the cooperation between employees and instill the mutual positive regard critical to workplace harmony. Diversity awareness is not about forcing employees to change their beliefs, which is what will make employees grumble. Instead, diversity awareness is about understanding the critical role of respect and how important it is to value every worker, even with their differences, so job satisfaction is more likely.

**Q. I know the EAP is available to consult with me on troubled employees and how to effectively refer them to the EAP. What other types of consultative help are available to supervisors from the EAP?**

A. Beyond consulting with the EAP about performance issues and referrals, consider the EAP as an expert source of help and guidance in five additional areas: 1) Improving relationships you have with your employees by examining your leadership strengths, communication style, and any opportunities for improving these skills; 2) Discovering ways to engage individual employees and motivate them, based on your observations of their work habits and personality styles and thereby maximizing their productivity and job satisfaction; 3) Assistance for yourself in understanding how to better manage stress; 4) Help for difficulties you face in communicating, engaging, and satisfying the needs of upper management; and 5) Guidance in managing team communication, team development, and resolving conflicts among employees, especially where personalities clash.

**Q. What does it mean to be a proactive supervisor?**

A. A proactive supervisor is a manager engaged in the supervisory role, making decisions that support the essential functions of the position and the organization's mission. Proactive supervisors are more successful at establishing the conditions that require their response, while supervisors who are not proactive must react more often to conditions that are thrust upon them. When supervisors are proactive in supervision, they think and act upstream to produce and create desired outcomes, rather than waiting and reacting to issues, concerns, problems, and crises that will appear later, often in more severe forms, and directly as a result of a failure to be proactive. Being proactive allows them to manage stress more effectively, and they go home at the end of the day less tired. Proactive supervisors are able to influence direction, control events, and feel more satisfaction in their positions. They put out fewer fires. Being proactive does not mean supervisors will not experience sudden problems or crises that require attention and an immediate response, but it does mean that they will naturally experience fewer of them.

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