

The Frontline Supervisor



Quality Employee Assistance Programs.

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January 2017

Publication of Wayne Corporation - Employee Assistance Program

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Q. We dismissed an alcoholic employee who relapsed after treatment, but now we hear he has been sober for over a year. It's incredible because his case was a 25-year saga of problems and relapses. What explains this? He lost a six-figure salary.

A. It is impossible to know all the factors that contributed to this pattern when the employee was with your company and the surprising success at recovery after termination. However, some common observations about recovery are worth understanding. Chronic alcoholism is always accompanied by an unpredictable path of progression—including problems at work and home, incidents and physical illness, and enabling patterns within the family and in society, all of which direct the course of the illness and the timing for when (if ever) the addict will accept treatment. A 25-year history of issues at work suggests a long-term pattern of enabling and confusion within the organization that may have contributed to the alcoholic's belief that one more day without entering treatment was possible and that after treatment, a relapse would be accommodated. Remember, alcoholism is a drug addiction accompanied by cognitive distortions in thinking, especially denial. Your employee's fear of job loss may never have materialized until after it was experienced, wherein the need for treatment and recovery was accepted in order to financially survive. But this is only a guess.

Q. I was about to make a supervisor referral of my employee to the EAP, but before I could, he went to the program as a self-referral. This is great, but I don't have a release signed, as I would if this was a formal referral. Should I ask him to sign one now?

A. Unless a serious work rule violation occurred, where a formal referral would be included, you can monitor your employee's performance for now as you normally would. You *should* expect resolution of performance issues. You will feel in the dark about what the status of your employee's participation in the EAP might be, but such is the case with any self-referral. That's okay. If your employee continues to struggle, then initiate a formal EAP referral and request a release as usual. Note: If your employee was aware of a pending supervisor referral, and decided to self-refer to prevent your communication with the EAP, this will have no effect on your ability to monitor performance and act as needed. The key is to focus on performance.

Q. I am growing tired of being a supervisor because I don't like solving everyone else's problems. This is how I've come to see my role. How can I see this job differently? I am about to quit.

A. The most common struggle supervisors' face in understanding their role is learning to manage and lead. This includes establishing goals and objectives, and then helping employees get clear on the required outcomes. When employees have this clarity, then things settle down and your life gets easier. Employees then know what to do, and you become less of a micromanager. Delegation is an integral part of this process, of course. It entails assigning work, handing over authority, and holding accountable those whom work has been assigned. Grab a book on the topic of managing people at work (many such books exist), and see whether taking these steps might take the load off. Meeting with the EAP to process this journey to improvement will make it much more likely that you will be happier at work.

Q. Is it okay for supervisors to talk about their personal problems and stress in front of employees, or are we supposed to never let them see us sweat?

A. Employees who perceive you as a "real person" are more likely to consider you approachable when the need arises for help or intervention with job problems they can't handle alone. This does not mean that you must make an effort to share your personal problems. Instead, you should present yourself in a way that matches your personality style and facilitates a professional and constructive relationship with employees. It is a matter of choice regarding how much you personally share, unless your job setting dictates otherwise, such as in a military or similar context. There is no hard-and-fast rule about personal disclosures, but you should consider their impact regardless. Remember, your relationship is not just with your employees, but also with *each individual* employee. Some employees may need you to be direct and formal, while others may benefit from seeing your more vulnerable side. Both types of employees can be high producers.

Q. How can I energize my employees and get them to feel excited about the work we are doing?

A. Energize employees by taking every opportunity to recognize their contributions while urging them to excel. Spend time periodically letting them feel your enthusiasm for the work, the goal, the vision, and the ultimate outcome because this positivity is contagious when it's genuine. Be sure you find your own ways to stay excited and energized because if you can't feel excitement yourself, it will not be possible to pass it along to them. Remind employees about their past achievements, and get them to understand the underlying reasons they succeeded and did so well. This will offer clues about what keeps them energized. Urge employees to top last year's achievements. If they feel your energy and genuine concern for them, they will accept your recommendation to do so without rolling their eyes.

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