

The Frontline Supervisor



Quality Employee Assistance Programs.

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July 2018

Publication of Wayne Corporation - Employee Assistance Program

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Q. If supervisors visit the EAP to get advice or consultation on unique employee management situations, but do not share their personal problems with the EAP, are they still guaranteed the same sort of confidentiality given to employee clients?

A. Any employee, whether or not they are a supervisor, or whether or not the nature of the discussion is about a personal problem, is covered by the program's confidentiality policy. Using the program to get help is what defines you as a client, not the type problem you bring. Ensuring that your discussions with the EAP are confidential reduces risk to the organization because it helps ensure that you are likely to visit the program without hesitation, seek its help in dealing with troubled employees, and thereby reduce risk that employees will be mismanaged. Mismanagement of employees can lead to wrongful discipline, workplace violence, conflicts, absenteeism, legal claims, and much more. When managing troubled employees or simply seeking to elevate their potential, consider what role the EAP can play. EAPs acquire experience on motivating workers, documentation, confrontation, praising and inspiring employees, making observations, and conflict resolution, and can guide you in "what to say" and "how to say it" no matter what the communication need might be.

Q. My employee told me, in a private conversation, that she visited the EAP regarding some problems at home with her spouse. Am I obligated to keep this information about her visit to the EAP confidential?

A. Yes. Periodically, all managers learn personal information about their employees through private conversations, employment records, hearsay, and personal notes provided to them. Sometimes employees accidentally disclose personal information under emotional stress. Your possession of this information carries with it significant responsibility, and the appropriate care of it is a matter that shouldn't be taken lightly. Here are some rules to follow: Consider all personal information about employees as private and never disclose it unless compelled to do so. In all cases, talk to your HR manager or legal advisor and don't act alone without such advice. Also, it may be tempting to share personal information about an employee in confidence with another manager/colleague and ask him or her to not re-share it. Don't do this.

Q. When giving feedback to employees, I notice they are often defensive. My intention is to let them know what they are doing incorrectly along with what they are doing correctly so they can avoid future mistakes. How can I improve my approach and make feedback more pleasant?

A. Giving feedback to employees is not about delivering the good with the bad and hoping for the best. Your attitude and approach are critical. Do you show annoyance over the shortcomings of your employee's work, or do you deliver feedback with judgment-free specificity? Do the latter because valuable employees are hard enough on themselves. More importantly, give feedback with the intention of motivating employees. If an employee is not energized following a feedback interview, you have taken a step backward in that relationship. Whenever possible, use feedback meetings to teach new skills. Develop good working relationships with your employees and discuss how you will give feedback to them. Let them know that the purpose of feedback is to help them excel, not to find fault or shake their confidence. Use these guidelines the next time you give feedback. You will enjoy giving feedback more often and you'll do it more effectively.

Q. My employee suffers from chronic pain. He is a good performer. He has more difficulty on some days than others, and this causes him to move more slowly, but it is acceptable. How can I be more supportive?

A. The strongest recommendation regarding supporting employees with disabilities, including chronic pain, is for managers to remain approachable and welcoming so employees with special needs feel willing to request accommodations. This means periodically touching base with these workers and asking how things are going. It also includes modeling inclusiveness to coworkers. Failure to do so may contribute to unnecessary employee turnover. Offering disability awareness to the work organization or work unit is also a plus. The EAP can discuss with you what options for this sort of education might be available. Research shows that stress, anxiety, and workplace conflict can exacerbate chronic pain. This is an added reason to maintain good communication in the workplace, recommend EAP assistance for those who need it, and help employees maintain job satisfaction.

Q. We have an older employee whom some people call "Pops," as in "Hey Pops!" I am a bit nervous that the term is age discriminatory. It rubs me the wrong way at least and a couple of others as well. Still, the employee doesn't seem to mind. What's the recommendation?

A. This term "pops" is being viewed by at least a couple of employees as discriminatory. Is it? It really does not matter. Insist that employees stop using this term because people find it offensive. That's the justification. Perhaps this tag may have been fitting for a chuck wagon cook in an old Western movie, but it's problematic in the modern era. It does not matter that your employee is not offended. The term denotes an age stereotype. Even if your employee is fond of the term, others may label it as offensive. There are many terms commonly used in the workplace that few employees would give a second thought to. They may feel benign. Unfortunately, many of these terms have shown up in discrimination court cases. Terms like "having a senior moment," "looking for new blood," "our new and seasoned supervisors," and "old school" may also be problematic with regard to ageism in the workplace.

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