

The Frontline Supervisor



Quality Employee Assistance Programs.

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Q. My employee has been absent for three weeks since the death of his mother. He phones to say he is dealing with estate issues. He has an attorney and family support. He is far past the five days of funeral leave we offer. I think a leave abuse issue exists, but should I refer him to the EAP?

A. If you have a bereavement leave policy, consult with your HR advisor regarding suspected abuse. Employees on funeral leave, responsible for managing the affairs of the deceased, may experience additional distress or suffer from grief that affects them later because they postponed self-care while attending to the needs of others. Suggesting the EAP is always a good idea for any problem. Dozens of things could explain the absence, but you can refer your employee to the EAP based on a finding of funeral leave abuse. EAPs have discovered that problems like this often are multifaceted. An employee may be grief-stricken, depressed, abusing leave, relapsing into an addiction problem, looking for another job, taking vacation, or all of these things at the same time! This is why EAPs exist—to help sort out the issues and help organizations retain valuable workers.

Q. One of my employees went away to a halfway house for meth abuse treatment. He self-referred and now looks great. I am nervous because he socializes with employees after hours, and he drinks alcohol with them. Can meth users drink alcohol safely?

A. Your employee may be abstinent from meth use, and his occupational and social functioning may be dramatically improved, but alcohol use following treatment for meth addiction would be contrary to the position of nearly all medical doctors who are experts on addiction and its treatment. According to the American Society of Addiction Medicine, addiction treatment requires “engagement in recovery activities.” Recovery means abstinence from psychoactive drug use, which includes alcohol, in order to avoid relapse to the drug of choice. Your job, of course, is monitoring performance and not focusing on the employee’s personal decisions outside work, no matter how ill-advised they may be. Relapse and its effect on performance may be evident in a week, a year, or more. If or when that time comes, engage the EAP.

Q. I would like to identify employees who appear to have the most creativity and drive. Is there a way to easily spot these employees in a work environment that does not allow for much of either?

A. Employees with creativity and drive tend to have skills often associated with entrepreneurial thinking. Meet with your employees regularly, and talk to them about what makes them excited and what makes them feel

engaged. Keep the following in mind: Do you have employees who like dreaming up new ideas? Are any employees naturally prone to spotting new business opportunities? Do any employees consistently demonstrate their ability to spin positivity out of disappointment and see the silver lining of the cloud? Do you have employees who take initiative on the job to undertake something new without being asked? Evidence of these behaviors can often be spotted even in the most controlled, uninspiring, and limited work settings. Employees who are courageous and unafraid to think outside the box will find a way to get their needs met, even if it is not in your company, so working with your managers to create opportunities is one key strategy for retaining them and reaping the benefits of their talent.

Q. My employee came to my office the other day to say he was being followed by agents of a foreign country and he hears them talking about him. He acts sincere, but I know this is mental illness—schizophrenia, right? How do I get the EAP involved?

A. Your employee's behaviors could be explained by mental illness, such as a type of schizophrenia, but an evaluation would be needed to learn more. Those affected by schizophrenia (about 1 percent of the population) may have their first overt episode of the illness in young adulthood or later. It may therefore be witnessed on the job, and it can be alarming to unwitting coworkers when delusions or auditory hallucinations are shared. Effective medications exist for schizophrenia, and unlike decades ago, they allow employees to function quite adequately. The risk that an employee with mental illness will become violent is overblown, but a fitness-for-duty evaluation afforded by your personnel policies is appropriate if behavior interferes with or is disruptive to the work situation. You can start by suggesting the employee visit the EAP, or consult with the EAP about the steps to take.

Q. We have a diverse work group of about 50 employees, and it is obvious to me that everyone gets along well. I never get complaints, and I witness no inappropriate interactions. Is diversity awareness education or training still needed?

A. Diversity and inclusiveness awareness can be suitable for any workgroup, not necessarily because of existing problems but to reinforce and strengthen a positive work culture that already exists. Think "preventive maintenance." Remember, if you have 50 employees, turnover is a natural part of the organizational process, and this alone could support a rationale for ongoing education. Many education programs enhance and reinforce existing strengths. A seminar on workplace communication is a good example. There is always more to know about it. Although you perceive a high-functioning and inclusive workgroup, you can never be sure that covert, unspoken, or unacknowledged biases exist and that they have been felt. Diversity awareness plays an intervening role in averting potential problems.

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