

# The Frontline Supervisor



Quality Employee Assistance Programs.

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**Q. We have conducted sexual harassment prevention training for employees and supervisors. I know a channel for bringing complaints forward is also crucial. Can you discuss that, and in particular, precautionary tips for the supervisor who receives such complaints.**

A. Although education is an important prevention measure, another piece of the “prevention/intervention pie” is reinforcement of a complaint procedure so employees understand it and are encouraged to use it. You want to know when employees are being discriminated against, being harassed, or facing other problems like bullying on the job. Periodically remind employees about the complaint procedure, and if you are a supervisor, be careful not to minimize or ignore complaints brought to you by employees. It is easy to ignore indirect complaints, “slight mentions,” and passing comments about problems from victims or third parties. No matter how it is couched, minimized, or diplomatically described to you, treat a complaint as a complaint. Anything less may cause you to overlook victimization. Do not treat harassment complaints as “personality conflicts” in need of some sort of coaching or mediation. Steps like these taken by supervisors that minimize or “define problems down” place organizations at risk of later legal claims that you knew or should have known about the harassing behavior, but did nothing about it.

**Q. How do I coach an employee with a negative attitude? Until now, I have ignored or avoided this employee. Should I continue this approach and coach others to do the same, or intervene? If I intervene, what steps can I use before finally referring to the EAP?**

A. Negativity is an attitude issue within the definition of job performance. Other factors include quality of work, quantity of work, attendance, appearance, behavior, and availability. Meet with your employee and discuss the negativity. Share examples so there is no dispute over what you observe. Negative attitudes can stem from many causes. Some are benign, but off-putting, like a cynical sense of humor. Others are more serious, like major complaints about the organization or supervisor or dislike of one’s job. Your conversation will probably yield a good explanation for the negativity, because most employees are aware of their personality issues gained from past confrontations or relationship struggles with others. Ask your employee how your relationship with him or her can facilitate a more positive disposition. Do not tell others to cope better with negativity. Negativity has a contagious influence, so refer to the EAP rather than risk morale problems.

**Q. Is there a way to not just motivate employees to do their job but also have them really go to the next level and become excited and proactive about their role and the company's mission? Or is it just pure luck if you get an employee who can motivate him- or herself like this?**

A. Some employees do motivate themselves because they know the value of being energized. They've learned that love of the job comes by engaging the organization, understanding their role and its importance, and seeing all the possibilities before them. Other employees must be inspired and shown what lies over the mountaintop. Your ability to inspire this latter group is a critical skill that can reduce turnover and attitude problems and boost productivity. To inspire employees, spend time with them and demonstrate your own enthusiasm so they can see it. They will be compelled to model it. Help them get clear about their role and your performance expectations. (A common complaint heard by EAPs from employees is a lack of understanding of what the supervisor wants from them.) Help employees understand the company's strategic plan and direction, their role in it, and the value of their work product or services. Always let employees have some say in what they would like to accomplish, and set goals, evaluate, and give feedback toward that end during the year.

**Q. Is it ever appropriate to encourage employees to quit their job versus referring them to the EAP? I think some employees would do better with another employer and would be happier and healthier as a result.**

A. Employee assistance programs are in the business of helping employees resolve personal problems that may affect job performance, so it would never be advisable to encourage an employee to quit as a solution to his or her personal issues if the EAP has not been afforded the opportunity to help the employee. It would be improper for the EAP to endorse or discourage disciplinary or administrative actions, but certainly the EAP referral should be attempted early in the process of this situation you describe. If you have not done so, refer now. The EAP can then help the employee make the best decision based upon all the issues discovered in the assessment interview.

**Q. A couple of weeks ago, I met with my employee to discuss attendance issues and make a referral to the EAP. The EAP referral was rejected, but surprisingly, attendance has been perfect ever since. Should I tell the EAP about this meeting?**

A. Although this meeting was two weeks ago, let the EAP know about it. Inform your employee you have done so. Encourage use of the program once more. There are a few reasons for doing this. (1) The EA professional may offer guidance to you on managing your employee's attendance issues. (2) Your employee's knowledge of your contact with the EAP may facilitate changing his or her mind, and information you supplied will allow a more complete assessment. (3) Your employee may have attendance issues in the near future and realize help is needed, thereby self-referring in a crisis. (4) The EAP would encourage and educate the employee about the value of signing a release.

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