

The Frontline Supervisor



Quality Employee Assistance Programs.

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Q. My employee complained to me that his supervisor was harassing and bullying him. I didn't take action, because I felt the first step was to have him confront his supervisor. I am ready to step in, but isn't this inappropriate until he has tried to resolve the issue with his supervisor first?

A. In years gone by, your approach may have been commonly recommended. However, in today's world of work, not taking action after being informed of offensive and hostile behavior is usually viewed by courts as a failure to act and negligence. Likewise, procrastination or putting off investigating the matter can be seen as apathy. Your good intentions are not given much weight. This is why sexual harassment policies support employees going to the next level of management when lodging complaints. It's better to ask, "How do I act now in order to get a fast, fair resolution regarding this incident?" Think speed and responsiveness. Is there a role for the EAP? Yes. The employee should be offered support. Do not think that suggesting the EAP is tantamount to accusing the employee of being the one at fault. EAPs reduce risk in business organizations, and helping employees manage any sort of emotionally upsetting incident is one way they do it.

Q. I'm good at praising employees. What else is there to know about praise as a way of motivating workers?

A. The positive effects from praising employees can be underestimated, but it can wear thin if it is not sincere. A form of praise less often used, yet highly effective, is praise in advance. Call it "pre-praise." When handing off or delegating assignments to employees, praise them at the start. Example: "Sherrie, with your past success at handling design crews, I'd like you to organize staff and manage the Jones account. I know we'll be proud of whatever you decide to do." This pre-praise, when sincere and heartfelt, not only inspires employees, but also motivates them to do their best work. You will improve your relationships with them, boost performance, and have them feeling more engaged. Be sincere. Just going through the motions, and not appearing genuine, will cause the approach to fall flat.

Q. My employee is quick to get angry. It's scary. It includes getting red in the face and shaking, even when playing cards on lunch break. Some coworkers think this is funny. Frankly, I am a little nervous. If he had a personal crisis, could he "go off"? Should I be concerned?

A. You have enough information to document this situation and be rightfully concerned about it. Consult with the EAP and discuss an interview approach that will support a successful constructive confrontation and EAP referral. The EAP will role-play with you the best approach. Be sure to talk to your employee in private. You don't have to wait until the next incident, but it will be helpful to have clear examples of the behavior that is concerning, its impact on others and work productivity, and what you would like changed. Certainly don't ignore the next opportunity. Your employee likely has keen awareness of his explosive style because others outside of work have either remarked about it or been victims of it. Coworkers should be discouraged from finding this behavior as a source of entertainment, including taunting the worker. Employees with explosive rage can act with violence while feeling detached from their ability to control their behavior.

Q. No one wants a cranky supervisor. Sometimes my mood is not the most pleasant. Are there any tricks or techniques for improving my mood so I can enjoy work more and engage with employees more effectively?

A. There are techniques for changing your mood. A frequent need to improve your mood could be a sign of depression or another medical condition. In this case, visit the EAP for an assessment to see whether there are other steps worth considering. Quick tips: 1) Exercise regularly. It will influence your mood to keep it more positive. 2) Feel an undesirable mood coming on? Go for a short "exercise snack," a 10-to-15-minute walk outside or in a new environment. 3) Sit quietly, and for five minutes, imagine some activity you experience great pleasure in doing, such as fishing, gardening, hiking, or playing with grandchildren. This will influence a more positive mood, and it helps you keep life in perspective. Moods are related to subtle negative "self-talk." The mood can change as you change this inner voice script. You will notice an improved effect with practice. Visit with the EAP if you remain concerned about the need to alter your mood, chronic feelings of irritability, or a communication style that does not facilitate a positive relationship with your employees.

Q. I intended to give my employee a disciplinary action for chronic absenteeism. He's been gone several days. When he showed up, he said he had just come from the EAP, where he signed a release. I feel a bit manipulated. Should I hold off on discipline or follow through?

A. It is a positive development that your employee decided to participate in the EAP, but whether to dispense a disciplinary action is a decision to be considered in consultation with your management advisors. The planned disciplinary action may have motivated the worker to act. Do you feel the disciplinary action is no longer fitting? Do you fear it will now undermine motivation to participate in the EAP? Should you base your decision on what's best for the organization? Is the message disciplinary action sends the critical thing? Every organization answers these questions differently. This situation is not uncommon, and it illustrates both the success and the influence of the EAP dynamic in organizations to attract, perhaps at the last moment, the most troubled workers. Sometimes, this is what an EAP success story looks like.

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