

The Frontline Supervisor



Quality Employee Assistance Programs.

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Q. One of my employees has a teen that was caught selling marijuana in school. I learned about this from another employee. The father of the teen is an excellent worker. Should I leave this issue alone, not say anything, or mention the EAP as a resource?

A. In a private conversation, let your employee know that you have learned of his child's problem. Mention the EAP and say that the professionals there can offer several types of support helpful to the family, including referral to expert resources in the community, help for understanding unique issues associated with parenting a teenager with a drug use problem, follow-up, support, and education. Encouraging use of the EAP may also reduce lost productivity or future attendance problems as your employee manages the legal problems, treatment issues, probation, and enforcement of his child's participation in a recovery program. This can be a rocky road that involves relapse, parenting challenges, and crises requiring the support of experts that the EAP can help locate.

Q. When employees are in conflict, it can disrupt workflow and group harmony, but should supervisors intervene in every instance? Can you offer guidelines for deciding when to take control of a situation and step in?

A. Most supervisors know conflict is normal in the workplace, and responding to conflict is part of a supervisor's job, but there are important guidelines. It is not necessary to intervene in every conflict; on the contrary, it is usually better to leave employees alone and let them work it out. If supervisors involved themselves in every conflict, they would likely create more of them because it would send a message that employees need not cooperate, compromise, or work out power struggles with each other and instead let you work it out. These are relationship skills that can be undermined by the authority possessed by a manager. A better tactic is monitoring what is taking place. So, when should you intervene? Intervene when the issues pose some sort of larger risk to the organization, as in the case of harassment, discrimination, or potential for violence. Hold employees responsible for resolving conflicts. Never let them perpetuate. The EAP can be a resource for supervisors when conflicts remain unresolved and you decide to speed up resolution by referring employees for additional help.

Q. When counseling employees, what are the most common mistakes that supervisors make that undermine their goal of getting above-satisfactory performance from employees?

A. Managers often forget the importance of effective communication and remaining proactive. These are the fundamental mistakes. This is the starting point for preventing performance problems. Poor communication typically leads to late interventions, after a crisis of performance already exists. Good communication means

periodically reviewing and clarifying expectations and discussing performance problems. Beyond these things, many supervisors do not have employees communicate their own understanding of what precisely must be done to meet acceptable standards. And, supervisors often do not discuss what outstanding performance looks like and how it is measured. When outstanding performance is clearly outlined, most employees will keep it in mind, and if they don't seek this level of performance, are inspired to perform well above standard. Busy supervisors sometimes step in too late, whereas acting early would save them enormous stress. Late intervention may find that the relationship with the employee has deteriorated, and this further compounds the difficulty of correcting performance.

Q. I have an open-door policy. I let my employees know they can come to me at any time to share concerns or problems. I rarely get visitors; so, this is a sign everything is going well, correct?

A. Well, maybe. An open-door policy encouraging workers to visit and discuss issues and concerns requires more than simply a door swung open. You must also have a psychologically safe workplace. A psychologically safe workplace naturally encourages employees to stick their necks out, approach you, and take advantage of what you are offering. They do so because they are confident they will not be rejected or punished for admitting a mistake, bringing a complaint, asking a question, or offering a new idea. Help employees feel respected, accepted, and comfortable at all times. Model this to others. The bottom line is: How you interact with employees outside your office will determine whether they will walk through your open door later.

Q. I referred my employee to the EAP because of ongoing attendance issues. This was a formal referral, but he didn't go and insisted no personal problems were to blame. What should I have said to win this argument? (He never went.)

A. There is no need to argue or verbally joust with an employee who refuses an EAP referral. Has your employee's attendance improved since your discussion? Watch for improvement and then recurrence of the problem. This is a common pattern with personal problems that interfere with performance. The urgency felt by your employee resulting from the confrontation may have been enough to create positive changes in his behavior. If attendance remains good, consider your confrontation a success. If attendance issues return, refer the employee to the EAP again. Ultimately, your human resources advisor or management may formulate a disciplinary consequence for continuing problems. If appropriate and within company policy, leverage this disciplinary action alongside a choice to attend the EAP (with an offer to postpone the action pending follow-through on attending the EAP). Employees typically choose the referral. Note: This is not forcing someone to go to an EAP. It's tantamount to an accommodation so the employee can address health issues or other concerns.

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