

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource -- Employees

State Employee Assistance Program 1-877-237-8574 (Toll Free)

■ **My employee broke her finger. A doctor's note restricted her ability to function, so she has been on light duty for four weeks. I am concerned because she says her doctor does not know when she will be able to return to full duty: Can the EAP help?**

Determine whether your organization has a procedure for managing employees who have sudden, temporary restrictions on their essential work functions because of medical problems. If such a procedure does not exist, consult with the EAP. With the employee's permission, the EAP could speak with her doctor about the restrictions, prognosis, and anticipated return to full duty. Limited information could then be given to you by the EAP. Doctors typically specify the length of time for work restrictions, particularly after follow-up appointments. Your employee was hired to perform the essential duties of her position. If the restrictions continued indefinitely, you could be forced to consider administrative options and the extent to which she is qualified for her job. Be sure to consider the applicability of the Americans With Disabilities Act in your decisions.

■ **I am a newly hired director. I have discovered that a few long-term employees have obvious performance problems. One employee arrives on time, but socializes until noon before doing anything. Is he testing my limits, or has this behavior been acceptable?**

You may be faced with the work habits of an employee that have been tolerated by the previous manager. The acceptance of such a work habit would explain why it is continuing after your arrival. It is less likely that he is simply testing you. Once you are sure of the work pattern, it is best to meet with your employee to find out why he is behaving this way. You can then ask that the behavior not continue. Be prepared for an explanation that your employee may find reasonable, but that you may find unacceptable. Consider a short discussion of your view and changes you would like him to make, rather than suddenly becoming heavy-handed. This is particularly true if the previous manager — and thus indirectly the organization — supported this behavior. Elicit the employee's agreement to make the change and expect it to take place.

■ **I have had many corrective discussions with my employee and have referred him to the EAP. Things have not changed. Before I propose disciplinary action, is there any**

Consider a written agreement to motivate your employee to perform satisfactorily and acquire a sense of urgency to tackle whatever issues may contribute to his performance problems. This is called a performance improvement plan. Check with your organization to see if there is a preferred format for this type of plan. If not, consider including the following in the plan: 1) a statement of the history of the performance problems; 2) attempts made to help the employee overcome the performance

last intervention that might solve the problem?

problems, including corrective actions taken; 3) a statement describing the adverse effects of the performance problems; and 4) a statement specifying the requirements of the performance improvement plan (be specific; these requirements should detail measurable or observable changes that will demonstrate satisfactory performance). Refer the employee to the EAP again, particularly if an earlier referral was declined. Specify a time period for the requirements of the plan to be met and the date of its review. Invite clarifying questions from the employee about the plan. Make sure that you and the employee sign the plan.

■ **After being promoted to supervisor, one employee confronted me saying he would not make changes in his work habits. He added, “I only have two years until retirement and you can’t do anything to me.” Is he right?**

As a supervisor, you have certain responsibilities to your employee and to the organization. This reality won’t change, despite what your employee said or how close to retirement he might be. An angry or troubled employee close to retirement may believe he is immune to the consequences of unsatisfactory performance, but few employees will test such a belief in a way that could lead to termination. The risk is too great. Indeed, although many organizations may be reluctant to take adverse actions against long-term employees, none have policies to preclude them. Assume your organization is committed to providing the support you deserve, and expect your employee to cooperate with management and follow established work rules. You could not expect support from your organization if you acted otherwise.

■ **When referring to the EAP, how much assistance in making the appointment should I give to the employee? What different things can I do to make it easier?**

Although a supervisor referral could be accomplished by simply providing the employee with the EAP phone number, there are a few other tips to consider. Discuss with the EAP your situation and whether any of the following actions are recommended: 1) giving the employee an EAP business card or brochure; 2) asking him if he would like to make the call to arrange an EAP appointment from your office; 3) providing the name of a specific EA professional for the employee to call. Never view taking a reasonable step to assist the employee in making an EAP appointment as “enabling” or “taking responsibility away” from the employee.

NOTES:

Plan to attend EAP’s June seminar, Improving Communication Skills. You may register on-line at www.state.tn.us/finance/ins/eap/

