

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

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

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

■ **Our company has an EAP that is well promoted. I have always wondered whether such visibility for the program is a good thing. Doesn't this say to our customers that there are a lot of personal problems in our organization?**

■ **Although our EAP is voluntary, regardless of whether an employee is self-referred or referred by the supervisor, I often emphasize to employees that my referral of them is "mandatory." It helps me feel more certain that they will go. Is this okay?**

■ **If I refer an employee to the EAP for behavior and performance problems, how should I respond if asked, "Do you think I have personal problems?"**

When EAPs began their rapid growth in popularity during the 1970s, some business executives worried about whether EAPs would make it appear as though a company were openly admitting it had troubled employees. There was fear that this would be bad for business. Indeed, the idea of talking openly about troubled employees in one's organization was new. But troubled employees have always been around. The financial benefits and positive impact on the workforce because of having an EAP overcame these fears, and the EAP movement blossomed. Big companies acquired EAPs first and then came smaller companies. No evidence ever emerged to show that talking about troubled employees was bad for business. Instead, having an EAP became a way for an organization to show that it cared about its employees and viewed them as a valuable resource.

Telling your employee that a referral is mandatory when the EAP is voluntary is inconsistent with your EAP policy. It's not what management had in mind when the program was established. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines mandatory as "containing or constituting a command; obligatory." This definition is not consistent with EAP ethics and accepted EAP practice. Some supervisors use the term "mandatory" as a substitute for "supervisor referral" in common expression. This also diminishes the positive perception of the EAP. EAPs are more effective when they attract employees. Attempting to make a supervisor referral mandatory confuses employees about the nature and purpose of the EAP. The EAP suddenly appears punitive or aligned with management. Support your employees, insist on accountability, and encourage employees to view a referral as an offer of assistance. Most employees will seek help without the need to coerce them.

Remind your employee that it is not your role to determine the existence of personal problems. Add that, no matter how obvious a personal problem might appear, the referral to the EAP is still based upon performance problems that you have documented (quality of work, conduct/behavior, attitude, attendance, and availability issues). Further discussion with your employee about personal problems is risky. It often leads to a

And what if I really do think he or she has personal problems? And what if they are obvious?

passive and unwitting approval by the supervisor of the employee's decision to select another source of help or solution to the personal problem. Remind your employee that the EAP exists as a helping resource, but it is his or her choice to accept or decline the supervisor referral. To help motivate employees who would naturally avoid seeking help for a personal problem associated with denial, be sure to discuss the likely outcome of continued unsatisfactory performance.

■ **We referred an employee to the EAP rather than dismissing her for attendance problems. She went, but the EAP had no recommendations. We are upset because she once again avoided consequences. Should the EAP have recommended something? How should we react?**

Your employee's attendance problem may not be a symptom of a larger, treatable problem, or she may have resolved her problem before the EAP appointment. Regardless, your goal in making a supervisor referral was eliminating or reducing your employee's attendance problem, not getting her into treatment. So you made wise use of the EAP. You made progress because you can now anticipate improved attendance. Even though the EAP made no recommendations, your employee is still responsible for the changes you expect. If attendance does not improve, you could reconsider an administrative response that you believe is appropriate. Until now, you may have experienced significant frustration in fruitlessly warning your employee. The present intervention does not have to be a repeat experience. It is a turning point with the promise of certain change that is within your control.

■ **My employee was absent without leave for three days. When he finally returned to work, he said the EAP told him to take off to deal with "stress issues." How should I react to this report?**

Under the circumstances, you should expect your employee to be responsible for following established work rules when requesting or reporting his use of leave. The EAP would not interfere with administrative procedures by attempting to excuse your employee from work in the process of assisting the employee. Conceivably, a health care provider might make such a recommendation, but the employee would be responsible for arranging any leave. It is possible that a discussion occurred between your employee and the EAP about a need to take off work. It is also possible that your employee has been absent without leave and hopes referencing his involvement with the EAP will help him avoid responsibility for this absence. You should expect a more satisfactory answer to your question if one is needed to support giving him the leave.

NOTES:

The EAP offers seminars onsite. Call 615.741.1925 to arrange a speaker for your upcoming in-service meeting. For a list of topics, visit our website at www.state.tn.us/finance/eap/.



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