

# THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

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

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

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■ I have heard that the EAP can be used as an “alternative” to disciplinary action, but should not be used as a “substitute” for disciplinary action. What is the difference between the two?

“Substitute” use of the EAP means using an EAP referral in the place of disciplinary action. This confuses employees and makes the EAP into a disciplinary tool. It also frustrates the supervisor, because the likelihood of an employee refusing the EAP referral is high. When the EAP is used as an “alternative” to a disciplinary action, the employee is offered the EAP as a choice over a pending, warranted, or possible disciplinary step. Substitution does not offer the employee such a choice, and therefore does not facilitate ownership by the employee of the decision to seek EAP help. Supervisors who find disciplinary actions so unpleasant that they can't take them are more prone to the substitution misstep and may be disappointed with the results. Although they may feel action was taken in response to a performance concern, improvement in the employee's performance may be only short lived.

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■ Although the EA professional was silent on the subject of my decision to terminate an employee, I ended our discussion with the feeling that I had a “green light.” I think the EAP believes there is nothing left to offer this employee. Should I assume this is the case?

**Do not relinquish responsibility** for ownership of your decision or infer from the EA professional's silence that the termination decision is supported or not supported. The silence that you experienced in the conversation with the EA professional should be interpreted only as the professional responsibility of the EAP to take no stand either in favor of or against administrative action. This prevents the EAP from interfering with the organization's administrative processes and is fundamental to the integration of EAPs in the work culture. The expertise of EA professionals should not be used as a means to judge your management decisions. A disappointing outcome of a decision you thought was approved of by the EAP would cause you to blame the EAP later. Even worse, the employee might think the EAP played a role in the decision.

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■ My employee was caught smoking in his office for the third time. This is against a local ordinance and company policy. I am sure this employee knows where he can find help to stop smoking. Is there any

**A supervisor referral** to the EAP is appropriate because a continuing performance-related problem exists. Your employee may know where to get effective help for smoking cessation, but remains reluctant to seek help, follow company policy, and obey the law. Your question is a good example of a problem that is not necessarily what it appears. A wide range of issues other than lack of knowledge could explain your employee's behavior. None would excuse the violation of your policy and the law, of course, but they may be related to stopping his behavior.

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**reason to make a referral to the EAP?**

Your employee is willing to risk increasing penalties for violating company policy and the law. Why? The EAP can explore the answer to this question, help him correct his behavior, and possibly to participate in a smoking cessation program.

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■ **My employee has been accused of sexual harassment by a female worker. Should I make a referral to the EAP while an investigation is pending? If so, what will the EAP do for him?**

**If you are a manager** investigating a sexual harassment claim, it can be helpful to remind the accused employee that the EAP can offer support. Prior to the completion of an investigation, this may include helping the employee prepare for the possibility of a finding against him. An accused employee will frequently deny the intent to harass, and will have feelings of anger and betrayal toward the complainant. Although accused employees are usually warned against retaliation, support from the EAP can aid in preventing retaliation. If a finding of sexual harassment is formally made and a referral to the EAP follows, the EAP will consider other help to prevent further sexual harassment. Regardless of the outcome of a finding, both complainants and alleged harassers are usually very upset. This anxiety can affect performance, lead to depression, and affect one's personal life. This provides a rationale for referring both the complainant and the accused to the EAP.

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■ **Feeling guilty and sympathetic causes me to shy away from administrative actions I know I should take with troubled employees who aren't making changes. I kick myself every time I do it. Can the EAP help?**

**The EAP can help you** with assertiveness skills needed to manage your employees. Start by seeing employees as responsible for taking charge of their lives and using resources like the EAP to resolve personal problems. Troubled employees use EAP resources less often when they do not feel accountable for satisfactory performance. You experience guilt when attempting to take appropriate administrative actions because you feel responsible for adverse effects on the employee that follow. You hesitate to see the employee as responsible for making such an action necessary. Your view contributes to worsening of performance or conduct problems. To maximize the potential of employees, support them and act earlier to hold them accountable for satisfactory performance. Believe that employees will act in their best interest with such an approach.

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**NOTES:**

**Supervisor training sessions** are offered at nine locations. Please sign up for EAP supervisor training classes today.



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