

# THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

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

State Employee Assistance Program 1-800-308-4934 (Toll Free)

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■ **I don't like some of my employees' personalities. One subtly undermines what I say. Another person can't take a joke. These faults don't stop them from performing their work. But should I tell them how their personalities could be improved?**

It's beyond the scope of your job to try to overhaul your employees' personalities. Instead, put the situation in perspective. We spend more time at work than with our families and friends, so it's perfectly natural to grow irritated with some employees. But you shouldn't speak up unless their behavior affects their performance. Example: If the individual who undermines what you say also fails to comply with your directives, then that's grounds for disciplinary action. But unless you can clearly identify how their personalities damage your team's productivity, you're better off accepting them as they are. You want your employees to respect you, even if they don't necessarily like you. That goes both ways. You want to respect each of your workers, even if you wouldn't choose them as friends.

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■ **I suspect that an employee has an eating disorder, but it's not affecting her performance. Still, I'm concerned about my employee's well-being. Is my suspicion sufficient enough to make a supervisor referral to the EAP?**

Your suspicion alone would not be enough to support a supervisor referral to the EAP. If you mentioned your concern about how thin your employee looks in a nonthreatening manner, and if this elicited her disclosure of an eating disorder, you could then suggest the use of the EAP. You are simply sharing your observations and are not making a judgment. If the employee insists everything's fine and her performance, attendance and behavior meet the required standards, then there's nothing else you can do. Pressing for more information can prove counterproductive; many employees prefer not to confide in their supervisor and it's important that you respect that.

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■ **After putting an employee on 90-day probation, I asked him to sign a form summarizing what we discussed in our disciplinary meeting. He refused and threw the pen against the wall. If I refer him to the EAP, won't he perceive it as my punishing him?**

Rather than trying to predict his perception, focus on what you can control. Explain in plain language why you're referring him to the EAP: to help him manage his workplace behavior so that it falls within acceptable boundaries. Tell him that throwing a pen against a wall was not an acceptable response. Suggest that he use the EAP to draft an action plan to address the performance issues that led to his probation. By stressing the possibility of a positive outcome—salvaging his job by meeting certain performance standards—you can direct his attention toward taking steps to meet and exceed your expectations and the job requirements, not whether he is being punished.

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■ **My employee’s psychologist, who works on contract with our organization, wants me to attend a session with them. He says it will benefit our relationship. The EAP approved of my worker seeing the psychologist, but not this recommendation. Should I go?**

No. You should not meet with the employee’s psychologist because that falls outside your role as a supervisor. Your job is to provide support within the framework of guiding your team to meet goals and operate at peak productivity. Attending a session with your employee and his psychologist crosses the line of appropriate support and draws you too deeply into the worker’s personal life. It’s likely that what you learn in that session would affect how you supervise the employee, yet you would be bound by confidentiality from speaking or writing about it. That would hamper your ability to document the individual’s performance properly. It would also prevent you from leveling with your boss or human resources team about the employee’s situation.

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■ **When I request something from a colleague who has technical expertise, his automatic reply is, “I’m too busy” or “Your timing is terrible. I’m swamped.” He doesn’t have a boss, so I can’t go over his head. Can I make a formal peer referral?**

Encouraging a coworker to visit the EAP is sometimes called a peer referral, but it is not a formal process for most organizations, or one on par with a supervisor referral. The employee is motivated to seek help after recognizing a personal problem or its symptoms with the help of a coworker or peers who have provided a supportive confrontation. A high level of trust is required to convince a peer to contact the EAP, but if you have used the EAP yourself, such a testimonial can be persuasive. Consider speaking with the EA professional about ways to improve your working relationship with your coworker as a first step. After analyzing the situation with the EAP, you may conclude that your peer is using the “I’m too busy” line as an excuse to avoid taking on additional work. To overcome his resistance to a more cooperative relationship with you, acknowledge the demands of his job and sympathize with what he sees as his plight. You may also want to ask him, “I rely on your expertise, and sometimes I need your help in a crisis. You make my job easier; what can I do to make your job easier?”

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#### NOTES:

Plan to attend the EAP training in November! The seminar, “Workplace Violence: Intolerable at Every Level” and the EAP supervisor training sessions will be held in the following locations: Boliver, Memphis, Jackson, Johnson City, Murfreesboro, Nashville, Clarksville, Chattanooga and Cookeville. Call 615-741-8643 to register or email [chrystal.winfrey@state.tn.us](mailto:chrystal.winfrey@state.tn.us).

