

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

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

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

■ **What role do EAPs play in reducing the likelihood of grievances filed by employees in organizations?**

EAPs play a preventive role in resolving personal problems that can contribute to conflict with management. This reduces grievances. In other words, a troubled employee helped is a risk reduced. Some problems like sexual harassment present such high risk to an organization that personnel policies may encourage employees to use the grievance process, if necessary, to stop it. The grievance process is an important tool in such an instance. Although a grievance can be time-consuming, the process can resolve disputes that could otherwise pose greater risks to all concerned. When helping employees with personal problems, considering the needs of both employees and the organization is often part of the EAP helping process. The ability to find this balance is the art of EAP work and what makes EAPs so desirable. Sometimes the best and first step in any grievance process is talking with the supervisor. EAPs frequently help employees to do this more effectively.

■ **My employee used to take initiative and was an outstanding performer, but in the past year she has become an average performer. I can't refer her to the EAP because her performance is still satisfactory, right?**

Your employee's performance might register as satisfactory on a formal review, but still not be consistent with her potential. This can be described and documented. Although you may not be justified in taking an administrative action, you have a reason to make use of the EAP. Consider asking your employee why her performance has changed so dramatically over the past year. Remember, this is not playing the role of an armchair diagnostician. Your employee may offer a personal problem as an explanation. At that point, you could encourage use of the EAP to deal with it. A supervisor referral later would be based upon continuation of the performance problem, regardless of whether your employee disclosed something personal as its cause.

■ **What are the key ingredients supervisors should consider when helping an employee correct performance?**

Helping an employee correct a performance problem employs steps known to facilitate change within the context of an effective relationship you have purposely developed over time. So, correcting performance and managing people is both an art and a science. Three important steps in correcting performance that are often neglected by supervisors include: 1) Placing emphasis on the problem rather than on the employee. This approach elicits a partnership with the employee to solve the problem rather than a defensive reaction to avoid guilt and blame. 2) Involving

the employee in analyzing the problem. You may be certain of the problem's cause, but helping your employee analyze and examine the cause will instill greater commitment to resolve it. 3) Following up with your employee. This step reinforces your employee's investment in correcting the performance problem and inhibits a setback.

■ **Our company is very political. Doing everything right and being seen with the right people is rewarded. Making mistakes or appearing out of line is not. I am worried that such a work culture could taint an employee's career if he or she went to the EAP.**

The history of EAP development includes fear and concern among cautious companies, particularly during the 1970's, when the stigma of seeking help for personal problems was considered by many to be worse than it is now. Despite it all, well-utilized EAPs emerged among the most hesitant of organizations. It was discovered that trust of the EAP overcame the stigma of seeking help. This is aided by: 1) top management endorsement of the EAP, with its endorsement well promoted; 2) an EAP policy and mechanisms to ensure confidentiality; 3) workforce interaction with the EA professional staff, resulting in visibility and familiarity among potential users; and 4) longevity of the EAP. Every level of the organization will eventually use EAPs that are well established. This improves their acceptance. Many people presuppose that police officers might not use an EAP for the reasons you cite, but EAPs that serve police organizations often have high utilization rates. Indeed, once trust is established, the program flourishes.

■ **I yell a lot — I admit it! It's my nature to get emotional, curse, and slam objects on tables, etc. I am sure it rattles nerves, but I think my employees understand me. Is there any reason to change my stress management style?**

Employees frequently offer each other mutual support to cope with temperamental supervisors who are prone to emotional outbursts. So your employees may appear to understand you and remain loyal. They do not confront your behavior because they are coping in another way. Still, you should take steps to manage your stress differently. The EAP can help. Employees may "understand you," but you risk being accused of creating a hostile or offensive workplace should you ever need to take action against a worker with performance problems. Your behavior might be used as a way to explain substandard performance. This would be difficult to argue against. Even worse, a troubled employee who resigns could blame you for feeling forced to quit. This could have serious ramifications for your company.

NOTES:

Are the holidays getting you down? Why not take advantage of the EAP's confidential, anonymous, free self-tests? For anxiety, alcohol, depression and eating disorders go on-line at www.mentalhealthscreening.org/screening — the keyword is tnscreen. Call 1.800.433.4468 for depression and alcohol screenings.

