

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

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

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

■ **I heard that my employee is going through a “rough time at home” and that she called the EAP. Her job performance is fine, but I want to ask what’s going on. Perhaps I can assist her. I don’t want her, and others, to think that I don’t care.**

If you know your employee well, you may feel the need to inquire about her personal problems on the basis of hearsay. Still, your employee has not shared her personal problems with you, and you should assume she does not want to do so now. What explains your need to ask her about her problems, especially if she is working with the EAP? Do you want to demonstrate support, or do you feel overlooked or rejected that she told others about her problems, but not you? Employees usually recognize supervisors as representatives of the employer with whom they have a dependent financial relationship, not as confidants with whom they wish to share personal problems. You can remain detached from the personal lives of your employees and still be a concerned and supportive supervisor. To ignore this boundary can cause you to be a less effective supervisor because you have chosen to incorporate personal issues in your relationship with the employee.

■ **If I have an employee with performance problems and don’t refer him or her to the EAP, will I get in trouble and be unable to take other kinds of administrative actions based upon poor performance because I did not first make use of the EAP?**

Employees are responsible for maintaining satisfactory performance and correcting their performance deficiencies using whatever resources are available to them. It follows that employees must also be responsible for recognizing personal problems that interfere with job performance, and then doing something about it. The reality, however, is that certain personal problems that negatively affect performance are characterized by strong denial. Such problems will make self-diagnosis and motivation to seek help unlikely. Following this rationale, management usually expects supervisors to use the EAP as a tool to correct performance. Failure to do so is costly to the organization, in addition to being hurtful to employees who might otherwise be productive. If it is your responsibility to make use of the EAP in managing troubled employees, it follows that management may discourage you from skipping this step in favor of other progressive administrative actions that could predictably lead to the loss of the employee.

■ **Our work unit will be experiencing tremendous stress next year as we accomplish tough**

Although EAPs play a key role in helping employees manage stress, supervisors and managers can also help in significant ways. During stressful periods, stay attuned to ways that can improve communication between you and employees. If teamwork is important, consider ways to permit

production goals. I hope employees use the EAP, but what can I personally do if I can't be a counselor?

more opportunity for employees to support each other. Research has shown a powerful link between coworker support and improved stress management—more so than any other stress reduction technique. Stress reduction can also be accomplished by redesigning jobs, changing the relationships between employees and those with authority and responsibility, modifying work schedules, making changes in evaluation and reward systems, and matching individual abilities with job requirements. Some of these alterations can be accomplished before things get stressful. Consider a meeting with employees to help them plan in anticipation of the stressful period. This may preempt the negative effects of stress.

■ **Our company just acquired an EAP. I don't see how it makes my job easier because it appears to add one more thing I have to do when managing my employees—make supervisor referrals. Can you explain how an EAP makes it easier for supervisors?**

EAPs take away an historic step in the supervision process, long considered difficult to escape—involvement with the problems and issues of troubled employees. Some supervisors may have avoided direct involvement in personal problems of troubled employees before EAPs. However, the more valuable or skilled the employee, the more tolerance is naturally shown by the supervisor, and the more likely the involvement in personal problems. Regardless, few supervisors avoid tolerating delays in acceptable performance, frustrating absenteeism and tardiness patterns, judging the acceptability of excuses, and suffering with the cycles of broken promises about improving performance without an EAP. An EAP reduces these problems along with your stress, making it possible for you to focus on the basics of your essential purpose—managing productivity.

■ **How can a supervisor referral be based only on job performance? Would it not be irresponsible to ignore an employee with an obvious personal problem, and not refer, even if performance problems didn't exist?**

Sometimes employees come to the EAP after being encouraged by the supervisor, even when no performance problems exist. But they are not formal supervisor referrals based on job performance problems and are not the result of probing the employee or armchair diagnosis by the supervisor. Instead, such referrals follow disclosures of personal problems by employees or visible signs of problems that are self-evident. Sometimes these referrals are considered “informal” supervisor referrals by EAPs to distinguish them from formal supervisor referrals and self-referrals initiated solely by employee-clients. You do not have to preclude suggesting a visit to the EAP when talking with an employee who has an acknowledged personal problem, but a supervisor referral is based on job performance problems.

NOTES:

Happy Holidays!

