

Employees—  
Your Most  
Valuable  
Resource

October 2009

# Frontline Supervisor



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■ **The national news about the murder of Yale University student, Annie Le really shocked me. The police said it was workplace violence that “could have happened anywhere.” Aren’t cases like this rare? I don’t see how they can be prevented when they come out of the blue.**

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■ **My employee is frequently late to work. I’ve not made a referral to the EAP because the problem is plain and obvious. The employee is a single parent trying to get three small children off to school in the morning. I feel like a heel writing the employee up, but should I?**

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■ **Our company recently established a drug-free workplace policy. It includes procedures for reasonable suspicion**

**According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics**, in 2008 there were a reported 517 homicides out of 5,071 workplace fatalities, so clearly, the problem isn’t rare. No one can predict violence and no surefire intervention approach exists, but there are important keys to prevention. Regarding co-worker-to-coworker violence, risk is reduced when employees are educated about workplace violence, its precursors, and how it manifests. Establishing a workplace violence prevention policy is important, but taking action is what really counts. Effective supervisor-employee relationships that make disclosure of personal concerns, threats, and worries by employees more likely can assist in prevention. Never make the assumption that *your* workplace, its culture, or its “caliber” of workers precludes violence. Never dismiss or take lightly a verbal threat of violence by an employee. Educate employees about workplace harassment, behavioral expectations, victimization, maintaining professional boundaries, and encouraging respect. Train supervisors to use the EAP to manage employees with attitude, conduct, attendance, quality of work, or other performance problems.

**It’s a tough assignment** for a parent to get three youngsters off to school in the morning, but your employee’s lateness probably has more to do with a lack of consistent planning and organization. Your unwillingness to enforce the standard of being on time interferes with his or her motivation to solve the tardiness problem. To prove the point, ask yourself whether you see short-term results immediately after a confrontation regarding tardiness. If so, something worked successfully; but it didn’t last, correct? Are you fearful that taking a stand will lead to a disciplinary action, possibly dismissal? Have a discussion with your employee assistance professional to get past this roadblock. Obviously, a problem like this one has multiple layers. It is a good one to illustrate how supervisors, through consults, and employees, as referrals, both benefit.

**An employee may** be severely affected by withdrawal symptoms, although not be actively under the influence of a prohibited substance. Withdrawal symptoms for some drugs, including alcohol, may be so severe as to be life threatening. A heavily drinking alcoholic in withdrawal and experiencing DTs is a medical emergency. Other drug use withdrawal

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**testing when we see signs and symptoms of an employee being under the influence. But what about an employee who is not under the influence, but rather is affected by withdrawal?**

can be severe enough to make an employee a safety risk. Shaking, tremors, sleepiness, clammy skin, agitation, mood swings, profuse sweating, nausea, bowel trouble, and muscle cramps are only a few of the many withdrawal symptoms that can exhibit themselves on the job. Enabling coworkers often cover for these behavioral manifestations. Suspected withdrawal symptoms from drug use can help substantiate the need for a reasonable suspicion test.

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**■ Employees in conflict can be very disruptive to the work group. I have no problem making a referral to the EAP, but supervisors should attempt to resolve conflicts first. The question is how early to step in, right? Also, does a “formula” exist for doing it right?**

**There is no sure formula** for resolving employee conflicts, but there is ample evidence from the world of work to guide supervisors in how to manage workplace conflict. One key observation is that you don't always have to intervene. In fact, intervening early can make conflicts more problematic for you and your work unit. If the conflict is not interfering with workflow and productivity, and it isn't prone to violence or associated with a serious employment practices allegation, then let employees work it out for themselves. Two people in conflict are capable of resolving differences, but it isn't easy, and it's not typically fun. That means they would love to have you join them as a rescuer. Coming to the rescue, however, can breed more conflicts because employees can count on you to bail them out. Avoiding conflict then becomes less important for employees. Engaging in conflicts that become more frequent becomes the norm.

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**■ My employee is very bright and performs well, but he bends the rules, tests boundaries, and tries to see how much he can get away with at work. I would like to refer him to the EAP, but I can't come up with solid reasons. Perhaps I should find a way to let him go.**

**Talk to the EAP and** sift through the issues and behavioral concerns that you have about your employee. Work with the EAP to formulate a plan for how and what you should document. It is better to take this approach and refer the employee to the EAP. Seeking a way to dismiss your employee could bring claims that the decision was based on pretext or discriminatory. Employees as bright as the one you describe know their rights and often fight with gusto those actions they perceive as unjustified. It is understandable how you can see this employee as a thorn in your side and a poor performer from the standpoint of his inability to conform to appropriate conduct and expectations. However, a strong attempt to harness his strengths and turn him into a team player with help from the EAP is a win-win approach that will benefit everyone.

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## NOTES