

Frontline Supervisor



■ I just referred an employee to the EAP but forgot to ask him to sign a release so I could confirm his follow-through. I also have not talked to the EAP about this. What will happen at the EAP interview? Will it be assumed that the employee is a self-referral?

■ I have an excellent relationship with each of my employees. Despite this, our workplace environment is characterized by backbiting, gossiping, cliques, and worker conflicts. We almost never meet as a group because I work better one-on-one with employees. Am I missing something?

■ I keep the EAP's business cards in my desk drawer. If an employee mentions a personal problem as an excuse for poor performance,

The EAP will ask your employee why he decided to use the program. Your employee will likely refer to your discussion with him about using the EAP and will probably state that he is following a supervisor's referral. Any discussion that references your involvement will precipitate further discussion about the nature of the referral, and the employee will be asked to sign a release with your name on it. Although this is voluntary, most employees want their supervisors to be aware of their cooperation and will sign such a release if they have good relationships with their supervisors. Your best move now is to phone the EAP and let them know about the referral before the employee arrives.

Employees benefit from regular opportunities to process stress, manage communication, and identify group problems and solutions. Staff meetings are therefore important for maintaining good morale. Your one-on-one style is safe and effective for managing individual relationships but not for managing groups. If employees don't have regular opportunities to sit across from one another and process stress in an organized manner, you will see interpersonal conflict emerge. The more stressful and demanding the work environment, the more likely there will be conflict. (Be cautious about identifying one member of the group as the one who "creates all the problems." This is a common occurrence among supervisors in your situation. Frequently one strong personality simply gets noticed more often within a group of coworkers in conflict.) You must be willing to face your employees *as a group* as well as individually. Group meetings may be a bit frightening and may make you feel vulnerable, but there is no substitute for them. Seek input from the EAP on how to overcome your hesitation to use this approach.

Although it is clear that correcting performance issues is your priority, it appears that you are not making effective use of the EAP as a management tool. The EAP service is not just for employees. It can also help you get from employees what you need: satisfactory performance. Employees who share their personal problems are not usually premeditating an excuse from accountability. They are looking for solutions.

I offer them a card rather than listen to excuses. I haven't had anyone take a card yet. Is it my approach or is it employee resistance?

Try selling the solution more effectively, for their good and yours. True, it is inadvisable to discuss any employee's personal problems, but simply listening and being supportive can help. Discussing the EAP as a good resource rather than simply handing over the business card will help employees seriously consider making the call. You'll get what you need faster, and you may help an employee resolve a personal problem of unknown risk to the organization.

■ I referred my employee to the EAP and she entered treatment for a drug-use problem. I think I am entitled to know more than the EAP is telling me about what's going on with her, because I'm the one who has been helping her all along.

Major changes are coming for your employee, but they are also coming for you. One such change is a new relationship that does not include overseeing your employee's life the way you have been accustomed to doing. Shifting gears requires learning to detach, unfamiliar as that may feel. Your employee will learn to take responsibility for her own life and recovery program. She will also learn to avoid having you be responsible for her. Ask yourself if you have gained meaning from your role as the responsible person. Will you feel ignored or forgotten if the employee no longer wants you to be responsible for her? Continuing such a relationship may jeopardize your employee's recovery despite your best intentions, and treatment will include helping the employee understand this risk. The new role for you is that of a supportive supervisor who focuses on job performance.

■ We have no financial way to provide rewards to employees as incentives. Frankly, I don't think many employees would be motivated by money to improve their productivity. What else can be used?

Money is a motivator for many employees initially, but it is not a powerful motivator over the long term. When considering incentives, remember that people will change their behavior when it will clearly benefit them to do so, based on what they value most. Many things are valued in the workplace, but the three predominant things are power, status, and popularity. In the workplace, power gives an employee control and influence over others. Status means prestige or elevated rank, and popularity means being liked or approved of. Your task is to figure out how to bring these values into the incentive mix with opportunities, duties, or job functions that match them. If you can provide employees with one or more of these three things, you will be providing powerful motivators to improve their productivity.

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