

The Frontline Supervisor



Quality Employee Assistance Programs.

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July 2021

Publication of Wayne Corporation - Employee Assistance Program

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Q. My employee's father died of COVID-19 last fall, and there was no real funeral. She appears depressed, and some days not very functional. Friends are worried because she was previously treated for drug addiction and is now drinking. How should I approach EAP referral?

A. Consult with the EAP when employee situations are compounded by multiple issues, like this one is. If your employee is drinking now but had previously been treated for drug addiction, then she is considered to be relapsed. Addictive disease patients in recovery are directed to abstain from alcohol and psychoactive drugs as part of their recovery program. If your employee is no longer an EAP client, encourage her to self-refer for the sadness and the difficulties she is having on the job. Many people experience a phenomenon known as prolonged grief disorder (PGD). This is a recognized condition that can result from the inability to participate in a normal bereavement and grief process. If her ability to function at work diminishes, consider more formal steps to encourage EAP participation.

Q. Complaints and problems that employees seem to "drop on my desk" are the part of my job that I like least of all. Sometimes I snap at employees when they walk in and "deliver" me problems. How do I better manage this process for less stress and so I feel like the boss, not a support desk?

A. Show supervisees how to implement a process for bringing problems to you that maximizes their opportunity to solve problems on their own and properly conveys only the problems needing your attention. Here's a possible start to a dialog: "When bringing problems to me, please 1) share the impact the problem is having on your work situation or work unit. 2) Share with me what you have done or tried to do in order to solve the problem. If it did not work, let me know why. 3) Give me a recommendation. 4) If there are options, share them, but be specific so I do not try a solution that will not work. 5) Let me know which solution you think is the best one and why. 6) Offer ideas for how to go about implementing the solution." This is one approach for teaching a process to solve more problems faster but avoid being so strict that employees do not come to you at all.

Q. EAPs help resolve personal problems such as stress, depression, workplace conflicts, and substance abuse. What about the EAP's ability to teach critical skills, like better listening? That is what my boss recently said I should consider improving.

A. The history of employee assistance programs has caused them to naturally be associated with resolving personal problems, but EAPs can offer other types of help. Further, EA professionals also specialize. Some may have expertise in organizational development, while others are seasoned pros at addiction recovery, imparting supervisory skills, conflict resolution, parenting, and more. Meet with the EAP, but zero in on the aspect of the skill about which you are trying to be more efficient. For example, regarding listening skills, key aspects include active listening, summarizing, using empathy, following up, running meetings, listening to learn, listening to evaluate and analyze, listening to understand feelings and emotions, and more. What about your listening skills are you trying to improve? Are you a good listener but experiencing problems that interfere with listening? Meeting with the EAP can help you explore these questions, too. It might lead you to a different approach or solution for improving listening skills.

Q. My employee is a hothead, but most of us are used to it. When does anger become a performance issue?

A. Consider whether your employee's anger management problem is a serious performance issue right now. Do not reinforce toxic behavior by adapting to it or encouraging others to do the same. Coping with inappropriate displays of anger enables the employee and may encourage his or her bad behavior to grow worse. You can bet that not all employees feel this behavior is benign or that it should not be addressed by management. Anger is associated with violence in the workplace, and the anger issue you describe might benefit from a professional evaluation. So, the behavior is a risk issue. Could an explosive incident in the future lead to some tragedy? If the behavior creates an offensive and hostile work environment, which it does by virtue of the need to adapt to it, take steps to have the employee correct the behavior by referring him or her to the EAP.

Q. Can the EAP sit with me and my employee to serve as a mediator in a conflict we are having about performance, strategy, and my expectations for what needs to be done in her position?

A. There is nothing to preclude the EAP from mediating issues; however, success in getting the changes you want depends much on the nature of the conflict you are experiencing. Is the conflict only about agreeing on a work unit strategy, or does it concern the employee making changes regarding performance? Whereas the former may be useful and lead to a satisfactory outcome, the latter could reinforce your employee's unwillingness to make changes. Why? The nature of mediation naturally gives and will be perceived by your employee as allowing options and choices. In effect, it elevates the worker's role in deciding whether change will occur at all. Meet alone with the EAP first. Discuss your goal and examine whether it is your need to be more assertive or some other refinement in the position's duties that lies at the heart of the conflict.