

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

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

December 2010

Q. *I haven't made a supervisor referral to the EAP before. I recall during employee orientations that there isn't a lot mentioned about supervisor referrals and how they work. Won't employees resist, thinking that I am basing the referral on a personal problem?*

A. Your employee may initially believe your referral is based in part on a personal problem you think exists, so it is appropriate to clarify that it is not. Explain how the EAP policy establishes a supervisor referral process based on performance problems. The rationale is that a personal problem may play a contributing role, but that you can't diagnose and are prohibited from discussing such matters. Say that a discussion of any personal issues would be between the employee and the EAP. You're interested in performance improvement and that is your sole focus. Of course, some employees will refuse a referral. You should always remind the employee about your remaining options for correcting the performance problems, and if appropriate, do not hesitate to mention possible disciplinary steps.

Q. *Two of my employees do not get along, so we created a strategy to avoid conflict by creating work flow around them. Projects are set up to avoid them crossing paths with each other. The conflicts stopped, so was this an acceptable solution?*

A. On first glance, this arrangement may appear like an effective solution, but it

probably has a significant downside that creates other problems. Enabling these two employees likely requires others picking up the slack, doing more work, making schedule changes, and communicating in different ways, all to accommodate such an arrangement. If employees are taking on more responsibilities than they should, that is a lot of accommodating. Ensuring that these employees don't cross paths means you are settling for something less than the ideal work flow that would benefit your company. There is bound to be unspoken resentment about the unwillingness of management to assert authority and insist these employees change their ways. There is a solution. Talk with your EAP. You will gain insight on the value of handling this situation differently with better results for the whole work unit and organization.

Q. *I glanced at my employee's wrist and noticed multiple cut marks. I fear this is evidence of purposely cutting the wrist. I didn't ask any questions, because maybe this is related to past issues. The employee has no job problems. Should I ignore it?*

A. You may be looking at evidence of self-injurious behavior that your employee inflicted, possibly in the past, but you can't know for sure. Self-injury is a secretive behavior. Research studies vary about how common this behavior is practiced, but it seen more frequently among troubled teens and young adults. Most eventually stop it, but employees with scars may be extremely

self-conscious about it. Cutting is a mechanism to cope with stress, gain “control,” relieve bad feelings, and gain attention. It may also be associated with an array of mental health issues and other personal problems. Scarred employees seek to protect coworkers or supervisors from concern or shock if the scars are seen, or they might worry about the implications for their job or promotional opportunities. It is appropriate to mention that you noticed the scars because they are plainly visible and could only be self-inflicted. There are also other risks associated with self-harm behavior. They include a higher risk of suicide. Let the employee know that the EAP is available as a confidential resource should the employee choose to use it.

Q. Will all employees with alcoholism eventually have performance problems that the supervisor can identify, document, and refer to the EAP?

A. Your question touches on two common myths about alcoholic employees. One assumes that alcoholics only experience performance problems later in their career histories. The other is that all alcoholics will experience performance problems at some point during their career histories. Some alcoholic employees enter treatment as a result of self-referral and non-work-related approaches. Many of these employees have no observable job performance problems prior to treatment. This does not mean, however, that they were not personally aware of performance problems. Some employees may perform adequately but never live up to their true potential. 1960s occupational alcoholism and EAP pioneer Lewis Presnall referred to this phenomenon as the “half-man syndrome.” Many years after recovery, it is not uncommon for employees to share stories about job-related performance issues

associated with their drinking that others never noticed.

Q. Every workplace is different, so specific strategies for managing stress vary, but what should we focus on as managers to help employees reduce stress? How do we come up with a list of things to try?

A. Almost all strategies to help employees manage stress fall into several broad areas. Brainstorming with your employees and surveying their ideas, even anonymously, will yield insights and concerns that can be translated into tactics to reduce stress. These broad areas of consideration include 1) flexibility of work hours; 2) flexibility with work location; 3) increased communication with management and increased social interaction between coworkers; 4) rewards for excellence or extra privileges; 5) employee control of work load, priorities, deadlines, and procedural steps; 6) increased trust from managers rather than tight controls and pressure created by oversight and demands; and 7) attention to the work environment and ergonomics that facilitate reduced stress.



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