

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

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

October 2010

Q. *The employee assistance program referred my employee only to alcohol education following a positive drug test. Apparently, the EAP didn't think alcoholism treatment was needed. Should the EAP have interviewed me? I have heard many stories about the employee's drinking practices.*

A. The employee assistance professional relies upon research-based interviewing tools to make a recommendation and an appropriate referral. Your documentation related to performance on the job may be relevant, but information you possess about the employee's drinking experiences gathered from hearsay could not be relied upon in an assessment. As part of an educational course, your employee's problem will be considered closely to ensure that he or she is receiving the proper level of care. Sometimes employees in alcohol education are referred to treatment. The assessment of your employee is more than a few questions of self-reported drinking practices. Questions overlap, and many areas of lifestyle are explored related to alcohol consumption and problems associated with drinking. Most alcoholic employees are unable to evade a positive diagnosis if one is called for.

Q. *How can supervisors be more effective in managing workplace conflicts, especially those that could become violent? We aren't psychologists or trained mediators, so other than disciplining employees, what easy, practical, and effective early-stage steps are there?*

A. It is a misconception that you must have special training before you can be successful at the simplest and often most effective conflict resolution strategies. Your most important tools are your eyes and ears. An active and involved supervisor will detect the beginning throes of conflict. When this happens, share your observations and remind employees in a firm manner about the company's expectations for appropriate conduct. This is your first step at intervention. It communicates to the employees that they have the responsibility to change their behavior and resolve the conflict. And it prompts a sense of urgency to do so faster. By contrast, jumping in to reconcile differences often sends an unspoken message that the unwanted behavior can continue until a solution to the conflict is discovered. Speaking up as described above is a simple idea. It's the art of being "firm." It is often overlooked or never learned by some supervisors. In many situations, it is your most powerful tool for correcting behavior.

Q. *Is it appropriate for me to place in our company's break room brochures or mental health information on topics such as depression, anxiety disorders, alcohol problems, etc.? Would this interfere with the EAP's mission or role?*

A. Encouraging employees to get help for personal problems is a good thing, but supplying mental health literature is not part of the supervisor's role. To do so would diminish use of the EAP and organization's investment in it. There is also a risk issue.

Mental health literature usually includes next steps, referral sources, and self-treatment ideas. It leaves the EAP out of the picture. Remember, your policy recognizes the EAP as the official source for referring employees to help. Without EAP motivational counseling, assessment, follow-up, and consideration for the demands of the job, the treatment experience can be undermined. Talk to the EAP about its recommendations. Some literature may be appropriate, especially if the EAP is mentioned as the referral source in it.

Q. Can you provide guidance on communicating bad news to employees and how supervisors should handle themselves to reduce anxiety among workers when plant closings, layoffs, or severe cuts in benefits occur? Are there any techniques or tricks that experienced supervisors recommend?

A. Upsetting and bad news is often preceded by guidance to supervisors from management about how to disclose it. When these guidelines or instructions are ignored, larger problems occur. Much distress on the part of employees stems from how supervisors personally feel about the news. A supervisor's anxiety can cause tactical errors in communication. Supervisors may feel guilty for passing along the bad news or fear employee reactions to it. This can lead to misstatements, rumors, more anxiety, false hopes that later fuel bigger resentments, and conceivably workplace violence. The employee assistance program is an excellent resource for allowing supervisors to discuss and process their own anxiety. When it comes to bad news, there are no tricks, but there are watchwords. They are "open," "honest," "clear," and "timely." Follow the instructions, and if there aren't any, work with other managers so there is consistency in communication.

Q. Everyone knows what enabling is, but I believe stressed-out supervisors are especially vulnerable to participating in enabling behaviors. What are some of these enabling patterns facilitated by supervisor stress?

A. The desire to reduce stress can lead to avoidance of confrontation. This makes it easy to react to troubled employees by enabling them. Most supervisors don't realize this connection. Unfortunately, enabling keeps a troubled employee on the path toward larger problems, so supervisors who enable can expect serious crises down the road. Typical enabling patterns include: 1) downplaying inappropriate behavior by employees, 2) denying or ignoring red flags that may be signs of trouble, 3) being too agreeable and not making waves with a troubled employee, 4) minimizing a troubled employee's condition when talking to the boss, 5) giving extra leeway or special treatment to a troubled employee, and 6) when a troubled employee opens up to you, jumping in to give reassurance that "everything's OK" or "you'll be just fine."



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