

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

December 2009

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

Q. When I write a corrective letter, I always include the EAP as a resource. Some employees act on these letters, visit the EAP, and correct performance quickly. Others ignore them. How do I help employees take these memos more seriously?

A. Employees who respond to your non-disciplinary corrective letters and those who don't are motivated by different things. Although most employees rapidly see the need to respond to a supervisor's request for changes or improved performance, other employees need more help to do so. A memorandum will be more effective if it succeeds in keeping its message uppermost in these employees' minds. Do this by including a specific day, date, and time for a follow-up meeting. Make it sooner than later. A follow-up date and place capture the imagination better and create a sense of urgency more effectively. To get more leverage with your correspondence, be sure to remind employees about the rewards for success and the negative consequences for not following through. Mentioning the rewards and consequences permits your message to appeal to the motivational factors that employees may experience differently

Q How can supervisors refer employees to the EAP earlier to resolve personal problems that interfere with their performance? Many employees get referred too late. When that happens, there is less of a chance to nip problems in the bud, before they become unmanageable.

A. Viewing the EAP as a means of helping employees resolve performance issues and not simply personal problems is associated with earlier referrals. "But an EAP deals with personal problems!" many supervisors might say. Yes, it does, but that did not fuel EAP programs' rapid emergence within the workplace in the 1970s. The supervisor referral mechanism to help employees with persistent performance problems is what spurred their popularity. Resolving personal problems follows. You will help more employees, reduce turnover, and discover that more employees enter treatment for problems you never suspected, by viewing EAPs as a helpful management tool. This historical rationale continues to make EAPs unique and effective, but it is often omitted or overlooked in contemporary workforce management literature. It is the crucial element of what makes EAPs unique and successful.

Q. My employee has wide mood swings ranging from acting happy and energetic to being quiet, isolated, and sad. The problem is that I never can tell "which employee" will show up. Is this bipolar disorder? I am not sure how to document it.

A. You should request a consultation with the employee assistance professional to zero in on behaviors and issues that can be measured, articulated, and documented. Documenting behavior can be difficult because the negative impact on the work situation may not be readily apparent, despite its significance. When supervisors witness behavioral issues that appear overtly psychiatric, the natural response is to search for and understand the mental health diagnosis.

It is natural to be curious about the diagnosis, but do not document your suspicions about it nor share your opinion regarding it. It is not relevant to your responsibilities and can only make management of the employee issues more complex. Instead, focus on inappropriate behavior, its effect on the work situation, and having the EA professional guide you in producing effective documentation.

Q. I have been asked to be less “aggressive” in my communication. Some think I am overly critical of employees and that I don’t communicate very well. I admit that I am not the touchy-feely type, but why can’t my style of directness be accepted? Should I change my personality?

A. As a supervisor, you must respond to employees in a way that helps them realize their potential for their benefit and that of the employer. There is nothing wrong with being direct; however, does your approach work for your employer? It appears that it may be off-putting. Certainly there are employees who accept a direct and forceful style, but what about others who gain more from a softer approach? Are you willing to make some adjustments? Your communication style is learned. It is likely that you are not aggressive all the time with every person you meet. This indicates that you are capable of “professional use of self.” This is the ability to determine and purposely adapt temporarily to the needs of another person so you can be more effective in the relationship with the person. The EAP can show you how to employ this useful skill without changing your personality.

Q. When employees with performance issues mention their personal problems, I feel obligated to participate in these discussions. It may sound cold, but I want to rid myself of this feeling and, like other supervisors, focus only on work issues.

A. Thinking that you are a cold person for not discussing personal problems with your employees is a clue to the importance of overcoming this challenge. Staying focused on what is relevant to work and avoiding personal issues can be difficult if you are accustomed to others relying upon you to support them and solve their problems. It can be even more challenging if you feel satisfied or rewarded for it. Is your awareness about getting too involved a recent development? Have you recognized this struggle in the past, perhaps with other relationships outside of work? The EAP is a good starting point to help you identify the pattern and work toward ridding yourself of this struggle. Your experience is not uncommon. If important relationships in your past, especially in the home, were associated with guilt for not being a “fixer” or if you had responsibility for solving others’ personal problems or preventing them, you could feel obligated now to get involved with employees’ problems. The EAP can help.

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