

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

February 2010

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

Q. My employee is in treatment following a positive drug test. Should I ask the employee how the treatment is going? It is no secret, as everybody knows about the situation. My obvious interest might help keep the employee motivated.

A. Your employee's participation in and cooperation with a treatment program following a positive drug test is something that will be verified and communicated to you. If "asking how things are going" means eliciting more in-depth information about the treatment, you should avoid doing so. The employee will discuss his or her treatment with the EAP, but that information will remain confidential. You may have a strong desire to know more, but unless your employee volunteers this information, do not inquire. Gaining self-awareness, feeling well, and achieving new insights make recovery exciting. Your employee may share this excitement with you, but don't push for it. Remember, an employee in recovery may appear highly motivated, but this does not equate to cooperation in treatment. To help your employee remain motivated, rely upon feedback from the EAP and your own monitoring of the employee's performance during the coming year.

Q. How do EAPs help supervisors not get involved in the emotional aspects of the personal problems that their employees often face?

A. When employees share their personal problems with their supervisors, it can be tempting for supervisors to involve themselves in the discovery of resolutions. Many supervisors in companies without EAPs entangle themselves in the personal problems of employees, and if problems are difficult and chronic, this can become a burdensome task. But it doesn't end there. It takes an emotional toll. Concerned supervisors with strong emotional ties to their employees may empathize too deeply, adding to their own stress. This can increase enabling behaviors even as performance deteriorates. EAPs can relieve supervisors of this burden. Supervisors are then free to detach so that they can manage performance while allowing EA professionals to do the helping.

Q. My employee takes frequent and unexpected time off during the year to take care of four young children. It's tough, and I feel sorry for this person, but I don't see how the EAP can help. The employee obviously needs support at home. I don't think there is anything else going on.

A. To you, this problem appears straightforward. However, it is almost always the case that new information, which the supervisor is not privy to knowing, is learned about during an EAP assessment. This is where the solution often lies. Although there is no way to measure it, let's simply say that supervisors may never get more than 80 percent of the true story or scope of the issues involved. The rest is learned in a confidential meeting with the EAP. Your employee must weigh how much to share about the problem he or she faces, while trying to ensure that you see him or her in the best possible light. This means withholding information or aspects of the problem that do not serve this purpose. This is why you should never assume that the EAP cannot help an employee.

Q. Many supervisors don't have formal training in conflict resolution, so is it a skill that is too complex for them to perform successfully? When two employees are in conflict, should the EAP handle it? Is there a formula for conflict resolution?

A. Even if supervisors don't have formal training in conflict resolution, they can facilitate acceptable outcomes to conflicts. It can be helpful to get specific training, get coaching from organizational experts, or simply read about conflict resolution. Regardless, every supervisor should learn the basics of conflict resolution. Employees in conflict must be tasked with the responsibility of resolving their differences.

Supervisors should not own the conflict even if they do help facilitate resolution. Don't accept the resultant status quo if conflict resolution does not initially appear successful. It is never acceptable for two employees to remain in conflict or for the work unit to suffer the consequences. Approaches to conflict resolution include 1) acknowledging that a conflict exists; 2) allowing employees to air feelings in an open and nonjudgmental setting; 3) getting agreement on the nature of the conflict and what it entails; 4) discussing needs instead of arguing about solutions; 5) working to find common ground; and 6) formulating solutions, following up, and having an intervention strategy in case things turn sour in the future.

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