

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

January 2010

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

Q. *Our company has a newly established employee assistance program and supervisor training is scheduled next week. I have been a supervisor for 24 years and don't think that there is much the EAP can teach me that I don't already know. Should I still go?*

A. EAP supervisor training has a focus different from what you have in mind. Training helps supervisors understand the history and function of EAPs and their unique ability to help manage troubled employees. Training will explain how EAPs fit into the normal supervisory process to improve productivity and decrease the likelihood of dismissal of employees for performance problems. For many supervisors, this is a new aspect of performance management. Ironically, the more experience you have, the more important the training is in order to understand how to apply the new EAP advantages to supervision. Prior to the EAP, you had your own approach to dealing with troubled employees or those whose performance problems did not improve. This approach did not include professional assessment and referral of an employee to appropriate treatment. A well-constructed referral to the EAP with good follow-up eliminates the frustration of managing these problems on your own, and in some cases, years of enabling. This increases the likelihood of salvaging your employee, and greatly reduces risk to the organization.

Q. *During the holidays, I had employees to my house for a big get-together. My thinking is that I will earn more respect and morale will improve when people get a chance to let their hair down and know me better personally. Am I right?*

A. Business management experts generally hold to the dictum that familiarity breeds contempt. In fact, there is very little argument to the contrary in management literature. In support of this convention, research on improving morale and increasing respect does not focus on socializing with employees or having casual parties as ways of doing it. You are more likely to earn less respect because familiarity with your employees allows them the opportunity to observe your personal faults. Whatever they learn is included in their estimation of you. Less respect usually follows. You should be professional, polite, consistent, and communicate well with your employees in order to earn respect. Consider whether a desire to socialize with employees reflects personal discomfort with your supervisory role or authority over employees. If so, consider help from the EAP and change in your attitude so that your view of supervision does not undermine it.

Q. *If I refer an employee who happens to be alcoholic to the EAP for performance problems, how is it possible for the employee assistance professional to successfully convince the employee that he or she needs treatment, especially if family or friends have never been successful?*

Q. How do I deal with disgruntled employees? I think that some employees like to complain just to complain. They are “negaholics,” and it is almost as though being negative is part of their personality.

A. Although some employees may frequently appear disgruntled, don't be too quick to dismiss every one as having an unshakeable personality flaw. Some employees have valid concerns but have difficulty coming to supervisors and saying so. Although this is a separate problem, first initiate a discussion and sincerely ask about the nature of the employee's concern. Don't target the disgruntled behavior, at least not yet. Instead, see it as a symptom of a larger problem. Don't be surprised to discover that simply talking with your employee may resolve the disgruntlement. Validating some employees in this way causes them to feel respected, and you and the employee can begin a new relationship based on understanding. A continuation of the behavior indicates a larger problem, with help from the EAP being a potentially important way of resolving it.

Q. Some of my employees are better workers than others, so I naturally have a closer relationship with them on the job. My communication may be more friendly and jocular. Does this negatively affect other employees, and if so, isn't that their problem?

A. You can't reasonably be expected to feel the same way about each of your employees. You do have choices, however, regarding the degree to which you demonstrate these behaviors. You should consider their effects and how a visibly different communication style with certain employees may not serve the interest of your work unit. Supervisors who have difficulty exercising control in this regard may be more focused on satisfying their own need for a personal relationship with subordinates than on what is best for the work unit

A. Not every alcoholic employee who visits the EAP is motivated to enter treatment, but the EAP setting has advantages not available to friends or family members. These increase the likelihood of success. Advantages include the initial reason for the visit and the desire to resolve management's concern about performance or behavior; the practitioner's counseling skills; the employee's lack of knowledge about alcoholism as a disease and its array of symptoms; and the employee's willingness to accept the EA professional's direction to enter treatment. The last of these is usually considered the most important because denial prevents acceptance of the illness, and an authentic desire to remain sober does not emerge until after treatment begins.

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