

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

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

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Q. *Is it appropriate to ask the employee assistance professional's opinion as to whether we should issue a disciplinary action (in this case, termination) while an employee is in a treatment facility or after discharge from treatment?*

A. The decision about the time and place of issuing a disciplinary action should not rely upon the opinion of your employee assistance program. Employee assistance programs do not participate in administrative or disciplinary decisions because it damages perception of the EAP as a safe and helpful resource. These decisions are outside of EAP practice. EAPs owning responsibility for such decisions can lower program utilization and thereby increase behavioral risk to the organization. Presumably you are concerned about the employee's psychological state of mind and the impact of the termination on his or her condition. Experience shows this diagnostic thinking cannot predict the impact of your decision, the course of the illness, or whether relapse will occur. The patient owns these decisions and outcomes. You should rely upon your management advisors and what they think is best or customary for the work organization. It is appropriate to discuss general issues associated with this type of situation with the EAP, but the specific decision will need to be yours alone.

Q. *I am sure there are employees in our work organization using illicit substances. I understand enabling, but what causes people to enable when they absolutely know*

how bad they'd feel if a terrible drug/alcohol-related crisis resulted or someone got killed?

A. Most people understand enabling as protecting, covering up, and making excuses for a coworker or friend with an addiction problem, but stopping enabling is not as easy as it sounds. To stop enabling a friend or coworker with a severe personal problem requires making choices that may create significant stress, guilt, and feelings of loss. The decision requires the enabler to experience personal sacrifice associated with changing their behavior. To no longer enable, therefore, is not a simple decision. It can have life-changing consequences for the enabler, and these are difficult for most people to face. The enabler usually manages this choice with procrastination, denial, minimization ("It's bad but not that bad," "She's a functional alcoholic," etc.), and projection ("It's not my job to deal with it"). The result is cover-up and protection of the drug user.

Q. *What's the difference between a compassionate supervisor and one who is so concerned about an individual employee's well-being to the point of being too vulnerable to lead effectively?*

A. Many supervisors confuse compassionate leadership with being submissive, timid, or easily manipulated. This is not compassion. A marine drill sergeant may be demanding and results-driven, but can show compassion when a recruit requires bereavement leave to attend a family funeral. Compassionate leadership is about tolerance and the

recognition of differences in individuals and their capacity to produce different outcomes or levels of success based on their personal strengths and resources. Being compassionate means being able to choose a proper response to an employee's difficult circumstances and making adjustments to one's leadership style to accommodate an obvious need for understanding that benefits not only one employee, but also the work unit as a whole.

Q. I have an ambitious employee who produces great work, but collaborating with others is a problem for him. He experiences too many power struggles, and before long he starts managing others on a team rather than collaborating with them. Any tips on managing or referring to the EAP?

A. Your employee enjoys being with coworkers, but prefers the leadership role over collaboration. But it is equally important to learn both roles; otherwise increased alienation of coworkers will result. Meet in private with your employee, and describe the issue as you see it. Your employee's ability to receive feedback and be thankful for it will be an indicator of amenability to change. Consider a mini-performance improvement contract with the goal of demonstrating improved ability to collaborate with peers. If issues continue, arrange a referral to the EAP, who will help your employee understand how his desire to control interferes with productivity. The EAP also will help your employee understand how powerful collaboration can be for work teams. Your employee undoubtedly has leadership strengths, so the goal should be to help him apply these skills appropriately.

Q. One of my account executives is a very grumpy person. This irritated persona has been tolerated by coworkers mostly, I think, because we think it is just a personality style. I have never made this issue a performance matter, but I have thought about it. Is it too late?

A. It is not too late to get started, but there are steps to consider in helping your employee. You must document clearly what you and others witness so it can be used effectively in a constructive confrontation. This is not as easy as it sounds. Many supervisors struggle with how to describe behaviors that adversely affect performance, such as verbal tone, attitude, and nonverbal communication. A consult with your EAP can help immensely. Discuss your goal, take notes during your meeting, and be clear on how you will communicate to the employee what you would like changed. A role-play with the EAP can help you. Chances are, you will see short-term improvement after the first meeting with your employee, but sustained improvement may not be forthcoming until underlying issues are addressed. That may require formal referral to the EAP.

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