

The Frontline Supervisor



Quality Employee Assistance Programs

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Q. Why is it necessary for the employee assistance program (EAP) to obtain a release and confirm the employee's participation after a supervisor referral? I am focused on performance changes, regardless of the employee's personal experience with the EAP.

A. A release of information advising you of the employee's attendance and cooperation with EAP recommendations is not necessarily needed unless participation was part of an agreement accepted by the employee, based on performance issues, to participate in lieu of a management action. However, in any case, such limited communication is highly beneficial to the employee. A release increases the likelihood that the employee will follow through with the EAP's recommendations. This is not only because the issue may involve resistance and denial, but also due to human nature: a situation tends to lose urgency once a crisis has passed. The release helps maintain this sense of urgency. Even if you are not personally interested in limited information, this step will enhance the chances of achieving the desired performance changes.

Q. I find dealing with inconsistent work and performance to be time-consuming and difficult. Often, employees seem surprised when I raise issues with them. What can supervisors do to speed up the process of correcting performance?

A. Employee clients often state in EAP assessments that the supervisor hasn't made sufficiently known what is expected of them. Many don't have a job description, and years pass without annual reviews for some. So, employees are surprised when their performance is corrected. Ensure that you communicate with the worker about the job roles, responsibilities, and standards. Check in and give feedback often at first, and regularly afterward. Examine with your employees each of their job functions and the standards set. Using this process, you are almost guaranteed to have no surprised employees when performance is corrected. Let employees know what "outstanding" looks like, and likewise with gradations like "above average," "average," "satisfactory," and below. Use performance improvement plans to maximize clarity, and then rely on your HR or management advisor for guidance regarding how to implement them. Tip: Encourage a workplace culture where accountability is valued and expected. If you do this, employees will naturally take ownership of their performance, reducing the need for constant oversight.

Q. I get angry with workers who do not correct their own performance and seem passively resistant to change. I know I should remain calm, but I fear if I don't demonstrate anger and frustration, they won't take me seriously. What's the answer?

A. In all interactions with employees, demonstrate a calm, structured, and empathetic approach. Ironically, you will be more successful regardless of the situation. Remind yourself to remain calm, knowing that you will think more clearly doing so. If you feel anger during a discussion with an employee, pause before you react. Three to four seconds will seem like an eternity, but you will collect your thoughts and respond more constructively if you do so. The challenge is to focus on the behavior and not the person. This guiding principle helps you disengage from any personality features that may trigger your agitated response. Frame feedback in terms of behaviors and actions rather than personal attributes; that will reduce employee defensiveness. For example, "Alex, I've noticed that the last three reports were submitted two days past the deadline. This delays our project timelines, and we then can't proceed with the next steps." Seek more support for yourself from the EAP and arrange a referral for the worker if needed. Be prepared to consider other administrative steps to help the employee improve performance.

Q. We referred a construction employee who stole paint to the EAP and decided not to fire him. He claimed it was for his house, but I'm doubtful. Can the EAP determine his true motive and inform us?

A. The EAP will likely uncover the true reason behind your employee's theft of the paint if it differs from the explanation initially provided. The EAP won't disclose this information, as a standard practice, recognizing the importance of confidentiality. They will only release the minimal information necessary for you to manage the worker's performance. This does not preclude the employee from sharing the real reason with you directly, however, if it differs from the original story. EAP assessment interviewing is a skill and an art, and experienced EAP professionals use effective questions to identify underlying issues that contribute to the manifest problem experienced by the worker. You decided to help your employee with whatever prompted him to steal the paint, so the goal is to address any associated personal issues in order to reduce the risk of his repeating the behavior.

Q. I am a new supervisor. What initial mistakes might I make in this role, based on your awareness of errors that are typically committed by other new supervisors? I know I should avoid micromanaging, being overly demanding, and isolating myself in a closed office, but can you highlight other potential pitfalls that are less commonly considered?

A. Aside from the missteps mentioned, new supervisors often make a few other common mistakes, including failing to provide employees with clear expectations for their work, avoiding difficult conversations, trying to be everyone's friend, and not enforcing policies consistently among employees. Not giving clear instructions leads to incomplete work and disappointing results that frustrate the employee and the manager alike. Avoiding difficult conversations associated with employee behaviors leads to unresolved problems that nearly always grow bigger. Attempting to be everyone's friend often blurs the lines between professional and personal relationships, and this can undermine your authority and complicate decision-making. In short, not enforcing rules and policies equally leads to complaints of favoritism and confusion among workers.