

The Frontline Supervisor



Quality Employee Assistance Programs.

502-451-8262 OR 800-441-1327

www.waynecorp.com

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(502) 451-8262 or (800) 441-1327

E-mail: info@waynecorp.com

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Q. We have an employee on the job who has been sober for many years. He has no performance issues but was an employee assistance program (EAP) client in the past. Reportedly, his doctor is recommending smoking marijuana to help treat insomnia and depression. I am worried about relapse. Should I contact the EAP?

A. Contact your EA professional to discuss your concerns about the employee. Afterwards, keep track of your employee's performance as you would any other worker, and stay attuned to performance issues. Since performance isn't currently problematic, your options are limited to confidentially processing these worries through the EAP. You're rightfully concerned. Using psychoactive substances is typically considered a relapse for those recovering from alcohol use disorder (alcoholism) even if job performance remains acceptable. Relapses tend toward a chronic path and eventual use of the primary drug of choice. The EAP may decide to reach out to inquire how the employee's recovery program is going and, depending on the outcome of that discussion, attempt to assess whether treatment is again warranted, make other recommendations to the employee, or perhaps, with the employee's permission, consult with the patient's doctor.

Q. If I phone the EAP to speak with the professional about an employee's issues, will this conversation be kept confidential even though I am not an "EAP client"?

A. Yes, your consult with the EA professional is confidential. This can be helpful before referring an employee, allowing discussion of unique performance issues affecting the worker. (Note that this does not breach employee privacy because the consult is prior to referral.) Contacting the EAP anytime is encouraged. Pre-referral consults help ensure that referrals from you are handled effectively and all the expected and anticipated communication points are understood. The last thing you want is to be confused or wonder when the EAP will phone you following a referral or what to do if that call is not forthcoming. Tailored coaching on approaching an employee and suggestions on addressing specific behaviors can make the difference in successful referral. In some cases, consulting with the EAP may help you intervene with an employee's performance issues so successfully that referral is never needed.

Q. I feel guilty considering disciplinary action for an employee with ongoing performance issues when they're also working with the EAP on personal problems. The advice to "just focus on performance" doesn't make that any easier.

A. It's not uncommon for supervisors to feel conflicted in this situation. Many don't fully understand that EAPs serve two purposes: They provide compassionate help to employees while also supporting the organization's performance and productivity goals. In this regard, it's the employee's responsibility to meet performance expectations. You're an empathetic supervisor, but empathy need not override performance standards. You may also see discipline as punitive rather than supportive. This common misalignment can impede your core supervisory responsibility to hold employees accountable. Your role is to make sure employees have clear goals, well-crafted expectations, and access to the appropriate resources so they can do their job. You might find it helpful to review, with the EAP and human resources, whether you've done everything possible to support the employee. (Clear communication, performance improvement plan, etc.) Doing so will help you feel assured that you've fulfilled your duty to support the employee if you need to proceed with disciplinary measures.

Q. I tend to be too lenient with rulebreakers, tardy workers, and underperformers. It's to avoid tension and conflict. Can the EAP help me be more assertive, less insecure? How? EAP is so short term.

A. The EAP can definitely help, but since employees have grown accustomed to your current style, some resistance is normal when you begin setting firmer standards; they may test whether you're serious about the new expectations. It won't take long for the EAP to assist you with behavioral tasks to help you establish a new approach to managing employees. This is called solution-focused brief counseling, and it's an EAP specialty. For example, after sharing information with the EAP (as a client), you may be assigned a homework task or two to build skills like assertiveness. The EAP may suggest that for the next two weeks, you address every instance of tardiness calmly within 24 hours. And you'll meet with the EAP to discuss your experience. Later, you may move on to brief corrective conversations with employees, role play them with the EAP, and examine what you said, what you felt during the corrective meeting, and how things turned out versus what you feared. You should anticipate a supervisory style in about four to five EAP sessions.

Q. An employee's negative attitude is obviously an important performance issue. But an attitude often seems hard to describe because it has a strong mental component that is hard to quantify. Give me direction on how to do it.

A. Most employees and supervisors agree that a negative attitude can disrupt the workplace and harm productivity. It often affects morale, collaboration, and performance. Documenting it can be tricky because if documentation is vague, employees can deny it and say you were "reading me all wrong." When supervisors document attitude concerns, they often stop at general statements and don't include specific, observable examples. This undermines documentation. The right approach ensures clear, measurable detail that supports the concern and is less refutable. Use two steps: 1) clearly label the attitude—pessimism, rudeness, blame-shifting, disengagement, apathy, cynicism, resistance, entitlement, sarcasm, victim mindset, etc. 2) then describe behavior and tone. Example #1: "Judy demonstrates a pattern of pessimism. She frequently makes statements such as 'This will never work' or 'Good going, genius, now we'll never meet the deadline.' Example #2: Bill demonstrates an attitude of entitlement. He stated to the team, "You all are wasting my time; doing this work is not why I was hired." Adding coworker or customer impact strengthens documentation.

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