

The Frontline Supervisor



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Q. I supervise about 100 employees. I don't have time to listen to all the interpersonal and relationship squabbles and problems they experience. Would it be better to refer complainers to the EAP, and not get involved in any of it?

A. Although the EAP is capable of helping employees troubled by on-the-job relationship problems and conflicts, it can't substitute for your role as a manager in the problem-solving process. When you proactively manage employees, you identify and intervene with inappropriate and offensive behavior, reduce behavioral risk to the organization, and use your authority to influence standards of behavior needed to conform with performance expectations. When you don't get involved in managing employee conflict, you fail to use your authority constructively, and therefore problems grow worse. Employees have a strong need to interact with a supervisor concerning their on-the-job difficulties. This includes "venting" concerns and gaining assurances that the supervisor is a partner in resolving a problem. Only a supervisor can make decisions, offer these assurances, and make commitments that might be necessary to help resolve issues presented by employees. All of these things are outside the EAP's ability to influence.

Q. Why could a company not simply provide telephone numbers of crisis and counseling centers and other resources directly to employees instead of having an EAP?

A. Although a company could provide telephone numbers of social service agencies to employees (a list is usually found in the Yellow Pages of a local telephone book under "Social Service Organizations"), this would not equate to an employee assistance program. A key part of an EAP is its integration with the organization's policies and procedures for managing troubled employees who would not seek help on their own. These include employees with alcoholism,

drug addictions, and other behavior or health problems. The longer an EAP exists, the more integrated it becomes, and the better its case-finding ability. The organization, in turn, benefits from more loss prevention and reduced behavioral risk. Without an EAP, supervisors and the organization would naturally become entangled in employees' personal problems as they were before the emergence of EAPs. The result would be fewer employees helped.

Q. I can't get past the idea that an employee would be referred to the EAP for violating our alcohol and drug policy instead of being fired. What underlies this consideration? The same would not be true of an employee who was, say, violent on the job.

A. If you have difficulty believing alcoholism and drug addictions are illnesses, it can be hard to see the rationale in referring employees to treatment. Alcohol and drug addictions have been considered treatable diseases by respected national and international health organizations for nearly 50 years. Your organization supports employees seeking treatment and realizes that recovery is possible and that retaining employees makes good business sense. Alcoholism and drug addiction can affect any company, and no level of the workforce is immune. Business and industry have decades of experience in intervening with substance-abusing employees, and the argument for giving them the opportunity to recover so they can be retained has won decisively. Encouraging employees to accept help without fear of discrimination reduces an organization's risk and the likelihood that substance-abusing employees will keep their illness hidden while it grows worse.

Q. My employee, whose job description calls for occasional weekend work, called from home and said he can't work on weekends because the EAP wants him to cut back for health reasons. I feel frustrated. How do I respond? Should I call the EAP?

A. Have your employee follow the guidelines established by your organization for notifying the supervisor about a medical need for modified duty. (This may entail the employee providing the appropriate information to an assigned person who retains it as confidential. If necessary, this person verifies the request so you can be confident it is valid.) You and your organization can then decide whether it can be accommodated. The EAP knows that an employee's availability for work is a critical issue. Although cutting back on overtime may be discussed, an EA professional won't typically make such a recommendation. This decision is deferred to a physician or other healthcare provider. With a release, the EAP can provide you with limited information necessary to clarify the circumstances of the request. The employer decides what essential job functions can be modified or changed.

Q. The EAP follows up with employees who use the program for a year or longer. Does this mean I can let the EAP worry about whether the employee is following through with its recommendations?

A. EAP follow-up is important to help employees remain committed to participating in recommendations given to them for treating and resolving personal problems. Follow-up after a supervisor EAP referral, however, is a two-part process with the supervisor having a key role in focusing on performance. Be sure to reinforce positive changes, but report any deterioration in performance to the EAP immediately. Typically, waning compliance with EAP recommendations precedes a relapse or a return to problematic levels of performance; however, this is not always the case. Regardless of the level of follow-up conducted by the EAP, a report of your employee's renewed performance difficulties will prompt the EA professional to take a closer look at the treatment or counseling plan to ensure appropriateness and employee participation.

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