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WELLNESS SOLUTIONSSM

A Monthly Newsletter for Supervisors

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

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Q. I spoke to the EAP and made a supervisor referral. The employee was cooperative, and I was relieved. Then something flopped. The employee came back saying the EAP had no suitable recommendations. Should I refer the employee somewhere else? What should I assume happened?

A. Do not make a referral to another source of assistance that your organization has not established for assessment and referral purposes. The employee may independently do this, of course. First, call the EAP to see whether a release exists and verify participation. You won't learn details from the EAP as to what transpired, but a signed release means there was follow-through. You may never be able to determine what happened in the EAP interview. This is why you must focus on performance. Did you send a detailed written account of the performance issues to the EAP and provide your employee with a list of those issues, after discussing them? If this did not happen, almost any outcome from a supervisor referral could follow. Whether the meeting led to arguing over performance issues or unsuccessful probing of the employee's personal problems, without documentation from the supervisor, a sense of urgency or desire to cooperate can be undermined in the EAP interview.

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Q. I have many employees whose performance I must document, but my write-ups are frequently delayed by days and I frequently lose important details. Are there things I can do to improve my recall?

A. If you can't write documentation right away or must delay it for hours or days, your memory will fade. There are two solutions. One option is to memorize this suggested five-question outline. With each incident, go through the questions mentally. This may help to jog your recall more effectively later. The other option is to write down the answers to the questions quickly and retain them to assist you later. Suggested outline: 1) What happened? 2) How did you respond? 3) How did the employee respond/react? 4) What was the effect of #1 on productivity? 5) What was concluded at the time of the incident? This procedure should not take more than 30-40 seconds, but even a simple mental rehearsal will improve your recall and make documentation better when you finally get to it.

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Q. Things are pretty "loose" in our work unit. We do a lot of partying and know each other well. Our work culture includes a lot of swearing at each other, but it's never serious. In fact, I would say we have affection for each other. Is the swearing a problem? Should I try to get it to stop?

A. Talk to the EAP and discuss a way of turning this around and curtailing this type of communication. If you swear at each other when things are going well, what happens when things are not going well or when you have an employee you wish to correct or discipline? It is likely that you are swearing at these times as well. The foul language is a risk issue for your employer because as a manager you have condoned a disrespectful communication style as a normal part of your work culture. If a complaint was lodged, you would face a difficult time explaining how this is nothing more than an affectionate form of communication. Intentions would count for little. Any of your employees who wish to argue that the work environment was offensive and hostile would have an easy time of it. You have a responsibility to protect employees from a hostile and offensive work environment, and it is virtually impossible to show that this sort of interaction supports that goal.

Q. Can the EAP help our work unit learn more about treating each other with respect? Respect means a lot more than tolerance for one's ethnic or racial differences, right? I think we need it, but what does that include? Where do we start?

A. Yes, speak with your EAP about respect and how to manage the work environment to promote a respectful workplace. There are several ways to approach your training needs, and it might be helpful to start with a confidential survey that the EAP might examine. Another alternative might be the EAP interviewing employees confidentially to get a keener understanding of the issues your workgroup faces. Other approaches also might exist for understanding your needs. Respect means many things. Some workgroups may have great problems with diversity and respect but have no problems with things like rumors and gossip that damage morale. So getting a snapshot of the needs is a good way to start. Employees will always look forward more to a training event of this sort when they can play a role in setting its agenda.

Q. I know bullying is not limited to line employees and that some managers can be guilty of this behavior. Is there any research that discusses why bosses bully? Can bullies "self-diagnose," see their symptoms, and self-correct? How many employees experience bullying?

A. A study conducted in 2009 by the University of California, Berkeley examined the idea that bullying among managers might result from feelings of inadequacy about the job. Several other studies that focused on bosses as bullies demonstrated this link - that aggression goes up when one feels threatened. One study estimated that 37% of workers claim their bosses had sabotaged their work, belittled them, or yelled at them. No study can say that every boss who bullies feels inadequate, but this is a recurring finding in boss-as-bully studies. A coping mechanism frequently seen by employees in these studies is overly praising or flattering the boss. A supervisor who is on the receiving end of this behavior may wish to consider whether his or her supervision style includes a strong bullying component. Of course, there is no better place to discuss a change in this type of communication than at the EAP. *Source: UC Berkeley News Release (October 13, 2009) on "When the Boss Feels Inadequate: Power, Incompetence, and Aggression."*