



A Monthly Newsletter for Supervisors

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

Q. My employee complained about stress and mentioned several physical complaints, such as sometimes having cold sweats, anxiety, and indigestion. The employee looked fine, but I recommended the EAP. Did I do the right thing? What if it was a heart problem and not stress?

A. Employees sometimes seek help from employee assistance professionals with issues best addressed by medical professionals. In these cases, the EAP relies on medical resources within the community to help employees. Your employee complained about stress, and you followed the policy about referring the employee to the EAP. Barring an obvious or potential emergency, a referral to another resource based on your determination about what might have been the true ailment would have been outside your role. Health conditions ranging from high blood pressure to rashes to headaches to sleeplessness often present along with other personal problems in EAP offices. They require proper medical assessment. Sometimes these problems combine with other physical, emotional, or environmental issues that benefit from EAP involvement. Regardless, the EAP will not assume that a physical complaint is simply a symptom of a mental health issue or stress.

Q. Can I refer an employee to the EAP to gain more confidence in skills and abilities? One of my employees has the skills, but confidence and negative self-talk is the problem. I could give the employee motivational improvement literature, but is that getting too involved?

A. Coaching employees and helping them boost self-confidence is appropriate for supervisors. Motivational literature can be effective in assisting anyone to aspire to greater things, so there is no harm in providing it. But what if it doesn't work or have much of an impact? Then it may be time to go a bit further and recommend the EAP. Before making a referral, however, talk with the EAP. Your discussion will probably lead to other techniques within the scope of your role that could help your employee overcome the negative pattern. Don't head down the path of having private counseling sessions to explore the nuances of your employee's problems. If your employee doesn't change, and negativity seems chronic and disruptive, consider the idea of a formal supervisor referral to the EAP.

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Q. Can it be considered retaliation if I refer my employee to the EAP? What if the employee thinks it would be a "mark" on their reputation?

A. Employee assistance programs are not punitive or disciplinary programs. They are programs of attraction and goodwill to help employees resolve personal problems or concerns that may affect job performance. With such a definition underscored by EAP history as well as a definition supported by national and international EAP associations, a properly conducted supervisor referral could not be genuinely viewed as harmful. EAP policies typically include provisions that disallow an employee's career or promotional opportunities to be harmed or jeopardized for using the EAP. Many big-company CEOs, in an effort to add their own emphasis regarding this point, have disclosed their own experiences with EAPs, with some making their resolutions of personal problems public—even recovery from alcoholism—with credit being given to the EAPs for helping them succeed.

Q. Are a "difficult" employee and a "troubled" employee the same thing? Why do many books discuss the supervisor's role in managing difficult employees, but omit thorough discussions about the role of an EAP?

A. In the EAP view, a difficult employee becomes a troubled employee when a supervisor's attempts to correct unacceptable behavior aren't successful. In other words, just because an employee demonstrates difficult behavior does not necessarily mean he or she is troubled with a personal problem that requires professional intervention. Moreover, it doesn't necessarily mean that the EAP is needed, at least not yet. Instead, most employees with difficult behaviors readily self-correct when the supervisor insists on it. While a difficult employee may have a personality style and behavioral patterns that grate on others, a troubled employee tries to control these behaviors unsuccessfully in an attempt to prevent adverse effects on job performance and security. Ultimately, however, troubled employees fail at willfully making the corrections they want because of underlying personal problems contributing to their dysfunctions.

Q. Employee negativity appears to be part of this current economic downturn. As a line manager, am I helpless to address it? I can't counsel employees, and I can't simply refer everyone to the EAP. So how do I make an impact?

A. Employee negativity can be worsened by the economy, but it is likely that the work environment fuels much of it. This doesn't mean you caused it. Supervisors don't hear it often enough, but employee negativity is sometimes not management's fault. However, everyone has a responsibility to intervene. Decide where your influence rests by considering the following factors, all of which saturate the literature on the subject of morale and negativity. Any of these issues could be the culprit and contribute to workplace negativity: (1) excessive workload; (2) concerns about the manager's ability to lead successfully; (3) anxiety about the future; (4) long-term growth, income, and retirement security uncertainties; (5) lack of challenging work; (6) boredom; (7) insufficient recognition for level of contribution or concerns that pay isn't commensurate with performance; (8) chronic co-worker personality conflicts; (9) perceived disinterest by the manager in the employee's career needs; and/or (10) a lack of opportunity to vent and process workplace stressors, misconceptions, rumors, and misperceptions. Notice how many of these issues are associated with or may be resolved by effective communication. You may have the ability to influence change in any of these areas, and the EAP can help.