



The Frontline Supervisor

January 2021

Q. I do not believe I am a bullying supervisor, but several employees recently complained about my supervision style as being such. I think the whole idea of bullying is nearly “fad-like” and an opportunity for employees to escape responsibility for having subpar performance. Am I correct?

A. In the past, the same argument was used to minimize the impact of sexual harassment in the workplace. Today, sexual harassment is illegal. Research has now documented its true cost. Bullying in the workplace is rapidly receiving the same level of recognition, also supported by research. See the citation on abusive supervision at psycnet.apa.org/record/2006-11397-011. Do you ridicule employees? Have you put employees down in front of others? Have you accused them of incompetence, kept them away from “the good assignments,” not given them credit for their work, yelled at them, or invaded their privacy by asking probing personal questions? Many of these behaviors were once considered natural elements of the traditional workplace, but not today. Talk to the EAP about making changes. Most employees who complain to supervisors about bullying say they do not see substantive changes from their tormentors. This implies that changing these behaviors can be tough. Still, you could remain at risk for employment or legal claims if your tactics do not shift.

Q. I have a new employee with whom I do not get along. The chemistry or temperament between us is not right, and I am afraid down the road that we are going to have conflicts. Can the EAP help?

A. Your description of “bad chemistry” is one to explore with someone in your EAP. As you might guess, bad chemistry is not a mysterious occurrence. You are describing characteristics of personality differences that influence communication, both verbal and nonverbal. The important aspect of this problem is any resistance to trusting your employee. Trust is crucial to your achievement or to your work unit goals. You may be inclined to micromanage this employee’s work. You may give less positive feedback about their work. You may be more naturally resistant to giving them attention, tending to ignore their contributions. Would you be inclined to avoid inviting this person to important meetings, have less empathy for their request for a raise, or criticize this person more? All of these issues can lead to turnover along with the other problems this sort of schism you are describing naturally creates. The EAP will help you examine the situation and arrive at a personal coping and change strategy that can guide you toward greater understanding and compatibility.

Q. My employee, an extremely bright computer scientist, is facing administrative actions related to a poor decision regarding ethical behavior. How can the EAP help, or can it?

A. The general guidance when it comes to almost any consideration of whether to use the EAP to help an employee is to simply make the referral. The EAP will then make the proper determination about what role it should play in helping your employee. Even if the EAP decides to refer your employee to another resource, follow-up is nearly always important, and therefore the EAP would play a part in this task. Employees with personal problems, especially those who over-use defense mechanisms like denial and rationalization, can be more prone to ethical lapses of judgment (lapses in their common sense). Your employee is smart, but is he or she levelheaded and unaffected by personal problems that would make it more difficult to understand and assess a situation requiring a judgment-based decision? The specialized knowledge of being a computer scientist is important, but it is not a prerequisite for sound judgment. The EAP will likely discover the underlying issue and know the next step to take.

Q. Should I refer an employee to the EAP if he or she tests positive for COVID-19?

A. Yes, consider recommending self-referral to the EAP. The coronavirus has tremendous controversy associated with it, and misinformation abounds. Unfortunately, people who are diagnosed with the illness often suffer from anxieties in addition to their other symptoms, including an anxiety about whether the illness will be terminal for them. Victims of the disease may wonder how they got it, whom they passed it on to, or whether anyone they know with medical problems or who is aged could contract the disease and die from it. This can obviously create feelings of guilt and concern. What are the long-term side effects? What information should I trust? Does this disease cause heart problems or other body organ damage? The EAP will offer help or obtain the support needed to help your worker overcome these dreads.

Q. Why are EAPs considered a means to help supervisors manage stress? Does this refer to our self-referral to the program to help ourselves or does this refer to the mechanics of EAPs and how they remove the burden of managing difficult or troubling employee behavior?

A. It is both. EAPs help managers with personal stress, and the EAP process helps remove the stress of managing the problematic behaviors of employees that may be linked to their personal problems. There is one part of the process that many managers forget, however. Any performance issue that is not improving is a potential referral to the EAP. This step is a de-stressor because the EAP can share the burden of helping an employee correct a performance problem. When supervisors refer employees to the EAP, they are, in fact, referring them to correct performance issues, not mental health issues or other personal problems. Frequently, it is determined that some personal issue impedes performance (but not always). In those cases, EAPs have been known to then refer employees to every sort of help imaginable, even language classes, pet sitters retirement planners, public speaking courses, reading improvement programs, and local colleges to finish degrees or acquire courses to improve skills and abilities.