



# The Frontline Supervisor

January 2022

**Q. Is it appropriate for a supervisor to raise mental health issues with employees, such as pointing out that an employee “looks stressed out”? This might prompt employees to consider using the EAP.**

A. Although it is not uncommon for a manager to use phrases such as “you look a little stressed out,” those might be misinterpreted by your employee. So, why not consider a different question with a business purpose, such as “you appear rushed and are fumbling with your work. Is there something I can do to help? Is everything all right?” This can lead the employee to mention something personal, in which case you can respond by recommending the EAP as a resource. Mental health in the workplace has received much attention in business news recently. This does not mean that supervisors should probe mental health issues or become diagnosticians. Continue to focus on performance issues that do not resolve. You will ultimately refer employees with personal problems earlier and more often.

**Q. My employee made a group of coworkers aware of communication problems she was having with her husband. One employee gave her the name and phone of a marriage counselor. I was a little uncomfortable with this process. Should I have discouraged this exchange and recommended the EAP instead?**

A. It is not unusual for employees to recommend resources to each other for dealing with problems, but the EAP would have been a better recommendation. EAPs do not do marital counseling per se because this is treatment/therapy, but they do start with an assessment that is free and unbiased. The goal of this assessment is to determine precisely the nature of the problem the employee is experiencing. Imagine the broad spectrum of issues that might exist in any situation like this one. Is this simply about communication problems or something more? Financial problems, drug and alcohol issues or other addictions, sexual issues, depression, or even an extramarital affair might be characterized in a group setting as “communication problems.” Indeed, most therapists discover deeper and more maladaptive concerns within a couple once therapy begins. Go ahead and recommend the EAP, even now. It is possible that she did not follow through with her friend’s recommendation. Share with her the nature of what a free and professional assessment can accomplish.

**Q. What are the costs of misconduct in the workplace, and what are the dominant behaviors constituting misconduct?**

A. There are many areas of misconduct, but the three that drive costs are discrimination, sexual harassment, and bullying. A recent study by Vault found that the cost of workplace misconduct nationally is about \$20.2 billion per year. When an employee leaves an organization because of these behaviors, the cost to hire a new worker averages \$4126. That is a low average, because this cost estimator from the Society of Human Resource Management is several years old and does not include many indirect costs. The latest report on misconduct in the workplace can be found at <https://vaultplatform.com/the-trust-gap/> (a short form appears before you can download the 16-page document). Among the findings, of women who have experienced sexual harassment, only one in five reports it despite today's education, policies, and legal remedies. Fear of retaliation and impact on one's career still drive the hesitancy to report victimization.

**Q. Over the years, I have noticed that the most difficult and troubled employees also offer the most resistance to supervisor referral to the EAP. A few have actually agreed to go to counseling, but not to the EAP. Why is it important to not accept the employee's alternative source of help?**

A. A. The EAP plays a key role in reducing risk to organizations regarding formal referrals. It is not unusual for difficult employees to resist referral and offer their own "solution" at a corrective interview. However, serious risks may continue without EAP involvement. These risks are not dispelled even if the employee goes to the same source of help the EAP would have recommended. Follow-up allows the EAP to gauge progress or lack thereof, identify waning motivation to continue in treatment, re-motivate the worker to cooperate with the provider's recommendation, identify additional help, or monitor post-treatment recommendations crucial to success. Imagine an employee with an intermittent explosive disorder, who is prone to violence, agreeing to get help but not going through the EAP. Accepting help is a good thing in such a case, but the risks mentioned above certainly remain.

**Q. I have always struggled with being assertive. As a new supervisor, I can imagine some problems this might cause. Are there any problems outside my awareness that I should be careful to avoid?**

A. Supervisors who struggle with assertiveness often fear saying no. Rather than state unequivocally to their employees that something will not happen or cannot happen, and risk disappointment or anger, they may give the impression that there is hope or that they will "look into it." Whether it is about a pay raise or some other question, they give employees the expectation of an affirmative outcome. For the supervisor, the goal at the time is avoiding anger or conflict with workers. Their strategy is to "wait and see" with a middle-of-the-road approach. Later, when the thing hoped for does not materialize, anger and accusations of broken promises occur. Trust is lost among staff. Unassertive supervisors often know they are setting themselves up for these conflicts, but the need to avoid conflict in the moment overrides their better judgment at the time. If you struggle with this level of assertiveness, contact the EAP.

**Questions? Call during business hours 815.748.8334, or after hours at 800.373.3327**

