



# The Frontline Supervisor

February 2021

**Q. Periodically, I see articles about empathy and supervisors. The dictionary defines empathy as the “ability to understand and share the feelings of another.” Why is this so important?**

A. Empathy in the workplace has wide application for supervisors. A simple example would be recognizing an employee is experiencing grief and offering a supportive response. A complex example would be listening to an employee’s complaints but suspending your judgment and not labeling the worker as a malcontent, but instead focusing on understanding, discovering a solution, and implementing it to benefit others. When you spend time observing behaviors of employees and engaging with them, you begin to identify their feeling states. Over time, you develop a skill called “empathic reach” or “accurate empathy.” You are not a mind reader, but you are able to detect with higher frequency and accuracy, issues and concerns affecting your employees. You are also perceived by employees as a safe person to approach with problems and concerns. For these reasons, empathic supervisors build strong loyalty among their employees.

**Q. I do not visually observe my employees since many of them are now working remotely. I would like to keep an eye open for signs of stress, but how is this done without seeing attendance, interpersonal behaviors, or attitude problems?**

A. Several research studies that track employee mental health have shown that the pandemic has taken its toll. What is tricky is helping managers support the mental health of employees without stepping into a diagnostic role. Increasing communication with workers is a good idea because this can naturally lead to more discovery about how your employees are doing generally. Another tip is to be appropriately open about, or at least acknowledge your own feelings of, stress during this COVID-19 era. This “disclosure begets disclosure” idea can prompt your employees to share their own stress issues. You can then mention or encourage use of the EAP. Note that when an employee shares something personal with you as a manager, the degree to which they demonstrate anxiety or concern is usually minimized. Understanding this can keep you from also minimizing the importance of an issue that could urgently need EAP help. (Research study: [www.qualtrics.com/blog/confronting-mental-health](http://www.qualtrics.com/blog/confronting-mental-health))

**Q. I referred my employee to the EAP, and the employee was very cooperative. The next day, I discovered he checked into a psychiatric unit for acute depression, but did not go through the EAP. I am surprised, but happy he got help. Should I work with the hospital directly or get the EAP involved in some way?**

A. You should contact the EAP and let the program know about the issues involved in the case. The EAP will not be able to initiate contact with the employee directly, but you can do so in a number of ways that friends, family, and employers typically do. The hospital will be a gatekeeper for this communication. Informing the hospital about the existence of the EAP will likely lead to the staff approaching the employee to encourage use of the program upon discharge. Local hospitals usually maintain close relationships with EAPs in their geographical areas and are very familiar with the sort of issue you have described. Regardless, upon discharge and return to work, encourage your worker to use the confidential and valuable follow-up services the EAP can provide. Realize that communication with the EAP prior to a supervisor referral is the ideal approach to using the EAP because it helps ensure good communication that helps the employee follow through.

**Q. I referred an employee to the EAP, and he phoned the next day to say he was taking a two-week vacation recommended by a therapist to whom he was referred. Would the EAP override our work rules to permit time off? I cannot afford to have him out.**

A. Note that EAPs operate within a functional framework called the “EAP core technology,” and the application of this framework underscores noninterference with management policies and work rules. Your employee should follow guidelines established for managing time off. A community mental health professional’s recommendation to take a vacation does not equate to treatment for a serious medical condition. Additionally, you have only a phone call to account for this need. Start by consulting with your human resources advisor. Those individuals are the pros who can advise on responding to policy matters. Document carefully, in case attendance and communication issues continue. Phone the EAP to see if they can discuss with you what they know about a recommendation for time off. A signed consent for the release of confidential information at the EAP typically allows communication with management regarding recommendations from medical professionals that affect an employee’s work schedule.

**Q. I heard from a friend that construction workers have a high rate of suicide. Is this true? What does the literature say? I work in this industry, but have not been aware of this before.**

A. The construction and extraction industries (mining, excavation, etc.) have the second-highest rate of suicide according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The rate is about 54 workers per 100,000 employees. Several factors are associated with this statistic: the highest rate of heavy drinking of any group, unsteady employment, sleep disruption, chronic pain-driven opioid use and addiction, work pressures, a male-dominated occupation with stigma associated with mental health problems and asking for help, poor work conditions, low pay, stress, depression, and social isolation. As a supervisor in construction trades, have frequent contact with your workers so you can identify performance issues including conflicts and quality of work or attendance problems, discourage bullying, resolve conflicts, and keep the EAP well promoted as a go-to resource for help. You may save a life and never know it. Always emphasize confidentiality when speaking about the EAP. Source: On Google, [search “samhsa report 1959 pdf”]