



March 2023

The Frontline Supervisor

Q. Is it okay to accompany my employee to an employee assistance program (EAP) meeting if the employee is nervous about attending, just to offer support and facilitate their engagement? I have an employee who is hesitant and made this request.

A. Phone the EAP to discuss your situation. Although it is atypical to accompany the employee to the EAP to show support, it is not prohibited. Anticipate only participating in a welcome and orientation meeting but not in the assessment that would include the sharing of personal information. Phoning ahead allows an EAP professional to discuss with you the nature of your employee's request and consider how best to approach their concerns. Realize that your attendance at the first session does not mean personal information will be shared with you later and that a release would not be signed unless this is part of a formal referral based on a job performance-related matter. You should avoid probing or discussing personal issues with your employee after the EAP meeting. The primary reason for doing so is the dynamic of how such conversations can easily lead to an employee's decision to disengage from a treatment or counseling referral.

Q. We had training in workplace substance abuse but not how to approach an employee nor what to say and how to say it. Can you offer tips for engaging with an employee whom we suspect is under the influence on the job?

A. Take a couple of minutes to observe your employee and document details such as slurred speech, unsteady gait, or difficulty concentrating. If your company requires a second supervisor's observation, or involvement of a union or business representative, make these arrangements. Company policies vary widely regarding these issues. Find a private location to have a confidential conversation with the employee. Express your concerns about the behavior but be direct and nonapologetic. Do not make assumptions or accusations. State what you have observed. For example, ask the employee, "Bill, you look a little 'off.' Are you okay?" And then allow the employee to respond. Or ask, "Have you been drinking today?" Be calm. Show empathy. Do not be judgmental. If the employee admits to drinking or shows signs of impairment, address the issue immediately and follow your company's referral policy, including whom to notify. The above is for general information only. Consult with HR and your EAP representative for greater clarification.

Q. The EAP doesn't provide legal advice, but how can consulting with an EAP professional reduce the risk of an employer being sued?

A. EAPs encourage supervisor consultations, and one benefit of these consultations is to reduce the risk of legal complaints prompted by missteps in the supervision process. For example, the EAP might help the supervisor present clearer expectations to an employee regarding their performance. This in turn would help prevent an unnecessary adverse job action for failure by the employee to perform to standards and a subsequent legal claim for being treated unfairly. EAP professionals know the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion issues in the workplace. During a consultation, the EAP professional may discuss the supervisor's awareness of how a decision or course of action might be received, particularly if it could lead to a complaint of discrimination. These are only two examples of how EAPs reduce legal exposure, which undoubtedly is one of EAPs' most cost-beneficial impacts.

Q. How do I confront an employee who suddenly is performing unsatisfactorily without sounding ungrateful for their past performance?

A. An employee who has been an excellent performer but is now showing a pattern of reduced effort and quality or quantity of work must be confronted, but the right approach is crucial. Schedule a meeting with the employee to discuss their recent performance. Acknowledge their past performance and highlight the value they bring to the company. Both aspects are powerful in motivating change. Let your employee know you appreciate their work and its positive impact. Be specific about the problem you are discussing, with examples of where they have fallen short. Include how the current performance issues are affecting the team, if applicable. Ask for the employee's perspective and what they think about the issues you have just shared. You may hear about personal issues at this point that are suitable for referral to the EAP. Overall, take the "we" approach to help get the problem resolved. For example, say, "Bill, let's work to get you back on track." Set expectations, a timeline for change, and a schedule for reviewing the employee's progress. Let the employee know you are a strong believer in their ability to deliver.

Q. I have been hearing the word "belonging" quite often as it pertains to employee well-being. Is this new concept, and what should it mean to me as supervisor?

A. The word "belonging" has come to mean helping ensure that all employees feel welcomed, included, and connected in the workplace. It also means that employees feel valued and respected for who they are, along with having their contributions recognized and appreciated. Belonging is important because it can lead to increased job satisfaction, engagement, and motivation. This can dramatically improve performance and productivity. Supervisors can value belonging by embracing employee differences, encouraging open and honest communication between workers, and finding opportunities for employees to grow and develop. Don't forget to celebrate achievements and contributions. Engage your employees one-on-one with effective conversations to identify feelings of lack of belonging. Do this by regularly asking them how they are doing and how the job is working out for them.

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

