



# The Frontline Supervisor

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**Q.** I have an employee with behavioral issues. I have not made a formal EAP referral because I fear he will quit if I do. He can go anywhere, and I can't afford to lose him. Employees sometimes complain about his behavior and attitude, but I can see they have also adapted. Should I still take some action?

**A.** Consult with the EAP to change this status quo. Left unchanged, you risk an eventual crisis or disruptive event from this situation growing worse. Effects on coworkers and yourself are likely far reaching. This troubled employee has lost the trust of his peers, and this adversely affects workplace communication. Reduced cooperation negatively affects innovation, outputs, outcomes, and productivity. Teams also make suboptimum decisions when they are not working well together. Your performance is also affected because your leadership will be devalued by your subordinates for your failure to act. Trust in your abilities erodes. Rumors spread. And your reputation suffers with upper management. To cope, you may begin thinking about quitting, thereby harming your career. Likewise, you are likely to lose income opportunities because of management deciding that you can't lead properly. The EAP is your first stop for help in developing a referral plan.

**Q.** I am referring my employee to the EAP. He is very cooperative and anxious to see the EA professional. I am impressed that he is so open about his problems with cocaine. With such motivation, should I still send documentation about his performance issues?

**A.** Yes, pass along information related to job performance to the EAP. Your employee should also possess the same information. Also, phone the EAP to discuss the referral, if practical, because there are typically nuances associated with any troubled employee's communication and relationship style that are easier to understand when discussed. Note that employees with illicit drug addiction problems survive by lying and manipulation. It is part of the lifestyle. Your employee may be sincere; however, addicts are fearful of giving up drug use, and statements or behaviors that appear sincere are frequently deceptions. Your employee may only be planning the next step of evading treatment. All of this is quite normal, and the addiction treatment community is aware of these behaviors. Treatment can work, even for the most deceptive addict, because a combination of unabated real-life consequences and accurate information about addiction treatment and recovery combine to produce an individual truly dedicated to recovery and sobriety.

Q. We have an employee who is on the autism spectrum. He's a great worker and we have accommodated some of his needs, like ensuring that the office has less noise and no fluorescent light. Is the EAP able to address the needs of special workers like this person, who may have mental health counseling needs like other employees?

A. EAPs are able to work with any employee referred to them by self- or supervisor referral and will seek ways to communicate and engage so a client's needs are met in the EAP interview. EAPs do not claim to have specialized knowledge about every problem brought to them. However, using the EAP as a starting point offers tremendous advantages no matter what the problem might be. These include:

- 1) a free and confidential interview by a professionally trained listener who is committed to impartiality in the next step of treatment or resource referral
- 2) an experienced person with expert knowledge about community and counseling resources
- 3) a professional who is willing to expend the effort, no matter how rigorous, in locating the proper referral source
- 4) follow-ups to ensure the proper help was received and any roadblocks are overcome in the EAP client successfully engaging with that help.

Q. Is it helpful for supervisors to discuss their personal problems with subordinates as a way of appearing more "human" and building rapport? The idea seems sound because showing oneself to be vulnerable allows employees to feel more at ease, right?

A. Management and supervisory skill development authors have debated the merits of supervisors sharing personal information with subordinates, and in particular, information related to personal problems or shortcomings. Employees may feel more at ease with such supervisors, but research does not show this translates to increased productivity. In fact, participating in this type of relationship can undermine the employment dynamic, which naturally includes a healthy sense of urgency to focus on one's essential job functions with due regard to the manager to whom one is accountable. When supervisors have personal problems, the best source of support and focused help is, of course, the EAP. Build rapport with employees by identifying needs, developing their talents, and helping them find meaning in their jobs. [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com) [keywords search: "self-disclosing weaknesses"]

Q. I am a new supervisor. I have never had training, and I can tell that this new position will be me learning everything the hard way. I bought a few books and I found some courses online, but what will be the most likely mistakes I will make? If I know what they are, perhaps I will make fewer.

A. Most managers learn by doing and by the mistakes they make. But there are important things to remember:

- 1) Keep employees informed, let them know what the intentions are for the work unit, and do what you say you are going to do
- 2) Keep information flowing. Workplace communication is the number one complaint of employees and managers alike. You can't overstate its importance
- 3) Put more time into knowing and engaging with your employees than remaining busy in your office
- 4) Use your expertise to solve group problems, not to show how much you know. Develop your employees as the experts
- 5) Don't seek acceptance by becoming friends with employees but by having effective workplace relationships
- 6) Learn the art of feedback and timely praise and how to make it meaningful, and create change with it
- 7) Consult with mentors on any of the above, and use the EAP when the going gets tough.

