



The Frontline Supervisor

May 2020

Q. How can supervisors support isolated workers who are now telecommuting? My telecommuting workers have doubled, and I am wondering what sort of problems these employees will be experiencing.

A. Supporting employees during the national response to the coronavirus requires establishing a mutually agreeable communication plan with appropriate frequency that can help telecommuters. Several media reports have discussed how over 70% of employees have experienced sleep disturbances because of the pandemic, but research on employee isolation shows it alone can also negatively affect sleep. Research has shown that family conflicts also affect the performance of telecommuters. Depression is an ailment shown to be associated with working in isolation. Ironically, research has also shown isolated employees are more susceptible to viruses because their immune systems become weaker. Presenteeism can also be a larger problem for telecommuters because they are concerned what others think, and fear losing a desired telecommuting position if not they can't work. Supervisors have the ability to listen, be supportive, and mitigate some of these factors, but it is also obvious that the EAP can be more important than ever. Sources: "The Psychological Impact of Teleworking: Stress, Emotions, and Health"; Mann and Holdsworth (ScienceAlert, Feb 3 2019)

Q. I have suggested on many occasions that my employee visit the EAP because of his grumpy communication style. Can I make a formal referral to the EAP for this sort of annoying problem? I have no complaints about quality of work.

A. Generally, job performance is an umbrella term that includes attendance and tardiness, availability to work, conduct, behavior, attitude, quality of work, and quantity of work performed. This scope covers just about anything that can be measured within an employee's essential functions. If you can describe and document this undesirable attitude and its negative impact on others and productivity, then you have what's needed to push for change. Consult with the EAP. The problem you describe is likely part of a long-term pattern, one that many people have adapted to, and therefore resistance to change will be great. Rather than just speak with your employee in an attempt to persuade, use a well-written corrective memo that describes the problem, its impact, and attempts by you to encourage change; referral to the EAP; what you would like to see changed; and how these changes must happen without delay. Get support from your manager because an end-run to the boss is not unusual when quality of work is not an issue.

Q. What are the more common reasons employees quit attending the EAP after being formally referred by supervisors for a performance problem?

A. Common reasons employees stop visiting the EAP or do not participate in its recommendations include these: 1) The employee believes the personal problem can be resolved without following the EAP's recommendations; 2) The employee does not believe the organization will issue a disciplinary action for future performance problems if the personal problem remains unresolved; 3) The employee finds an alternative treatment option (usually one that is less directive and effective); 4) The employee has other employment options (or income sources) that decrease motivation and urgency to follow through with EAP recommendations; 5) The employee believes the supervisor referral is punitive, not supported by tangible performance problems, and therefore unnecessary. EA professionals are skilled at intervening and overcoming most of these motivational hurdles, but supervisor referrals that produce the most motivated employees are usually well planned. This requires good communication established in advance with the EAP

Q. My employee went to the EAP after disclosing domestic violence issues at home. I'm nervous. Issues of this type can spill into the workplace. I'd like her to sign a release so I can at least hear that things are working out well at the EAP. Is this appropriate?

A. This is a self-referral encouraged by you, and of course she is not obligated to sign a release of information. Nothing prohibits you from asking your employee to voluntarily sign a release so you can receive the most minimal information, but trust the EAP to manage this referral properly. If a threat or safety issue emerged or was discovered by the EAP, confidentiality provisions would permit disclosure so you could be readily informed. This is the recommended approach to helping you feel assured that this case is in good hands. This approach is also in line with proper EAP principles and application.

Q. As a new supervisor, I feel new stresses I have never experienced before. I know I have the skills for this job, but the anxiety keeps me from enjoying it. Can the EAP help me be calmer, focused, and deliberate in how I approach all the required new skills managers must employ, or should I get a coach?

A. As a new supervisor experiencing worry and strain, you may benefit from a two-track approach. This would include getting a coach or supervision mentor, but also working periodically and confidentially with the EAP, where you can share what is more deeply personal about your experience and fears. The EAP can help you gain insight and acquire new skills related to communication; examine prior coping skills for managing problems in your life and learn new ones; and learn about self-awareness, relationship development, stress management, managing the experience of feeling overwhelmed, dealing with self-doubts, and overcoming the impostor syndrome (a normal, nearly universal experience of new hires or appointees fearing they don't know what they are doing and that others will suddenly discover it.)