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The Frontline Supervisor

Q. As a new supervisor, I have no concerns about being respected or directing others. My concern is not meeting the expectations of management and my higher-ups. My anxiety is causing me to make mistakes, forget things, and creating fear of the boom being lowered on me!

A. Certainly anxiety can affect performance, but there are several steps you can take to overcome it: 1) Develop a clear understanding of the goals, expectations, priorities, and essential functions of your job. Overlooking this is the most common reason for anxiety among new supervisors (and new employees in general). Meet with your supervisor so you are clear on these issues. 2) Be proactive in asking for feedback. Anxiety can make you hesitant to seek the views of others, but that information will bring you the relief of being in sync with your supervisor's expectations. 3) Always know your team's progress, challenges, and successes. Discover the most suitable way of regularly communicating with management about these metrics. 4) Don't allow the days to pass without having a written, detailed plan for how you will meet the needs and expectations of your position. Without it, you will feel rudderless while fighting fire after fire, and you will continue to worry about where to focus your energy. 5) Finally, reach out to the EAP for help.

Q. My employee has a few performance issues, and I need to make a referral to the EAP, but he is stubborn and tends to intellectualize. Can the EAP really make progress with someone whose personality style is so defensive?

A. If your employee values his job, it's likely that progress will be made in getting the changes you want and need for the organization. Remember, your formal referral is not a casual act. It is based on performance; therefore, you must communicate that change is expected and non-negotiable. A signed release is important to ensure appropriate, ongoing feedback to you. If you communicate this sufficiently, the employee's motivation will be easier for the EAP to manage, despite his ego and his resistant attitude. The employee assistance professional won't engage your employee in a counseling process that only serves as an intellectual exercise. More likely the approach will be solution-focused and include important elements that allow him to understand how this personality style is creating roadblocks that stand in the way of change. EAPs are very experienced with the wide variety of personalities of employees who seek help for personal problems.

Q. It was necessary to give my employee a written reprimand for a job infraction. The infraction wasn't career-ending, but it was severe. Now I only get the cold shoulder from this worker, and our discussions are always work focused. How do I deal with this tension, which seems to harm our work climate?

A. It is not unusual for an employee to feel anger for receiving a disciplinary action, especially if he or she believes it was unwarranted or excessive. How your employee responds to such actions is a performance issue. Meet with your employee to discuss his or her response to the disciplinary action. Define the response as a separate issue of concern. The objective is to help your employee deal constructively with the disciplinary action. Recommend the EAP again as a way of helping the employee cope. Be sure to demonstrate your expectations for a continuing positive and productive relationship. Remember, discipline isn't punishment. It's about correcting performance. If necessary, meet with the EAP yourself to ensure that no issues associated with your communication or supervision style are interfering with your goal of bringing stability and positivity back to this relationship.

Q. How can managers best support employees who are on the autism spectrum? Is there anything specific I need to know as I engage with this unique group of people?

A. Your job as a supervisor is supporting employees in general, but with neurodiverse employees the goal is to create a workplace that is inclusive and where they feel comfortable. These ideas should give you a good start: 1) Be clear and direct in your communication. Explain your expectations and give feedback. 2) Anticipate that employees will take more time to process information or respond to questions. So, allow them to take that extra time. 3) Incorporate structure, predictability, and routines in the work environment. This will allow those on the autism spectrum to feel more comfortable and confident on the job. 4) Use visual aids when explaining routines and procedures. 5) Give feedback to help those on the spectrum improve and when they are doing a good job. 6) If possible, create a quiet workspace for spectrum employees, or perhaps grant a request for noise-canceling headphones, so they can work more efficiently. 7) Consider education and awareness programs, perhaps through the EAP, that can help coworkers foster understanding and acceptance of neurodiverse workers and differences in their communication styles and behaviors.

Q. I can't afford to lose my employee. However, he has numerous work issues that I plead with him to correct. Although they are not huge, and they don't interfere with the positive financial impact he brings, I worry whether his performance will someday suffer in serious ways.

A. Your employee is not making changes because he does not perceive the need to do so. There are many motivational approaches to explore, but you will need to tailor your approach to his situation. This is where your EAP can be of enormous help. Discuss with the employee assistance professional the circumstances of this employee's problems. Then decide whether any or a combination of these factors might influence his visit with the EAP or otherwise create a sense of urgency to change. Explore the following options: 1) Coach your worker to improve his skills and abilities. 2) Clarify your expectations to improve his ability to set goals and objectives. 3) Identify ways to recognize and reward the worker for achievements and hard work. 4) Improve your feedback, whether you focus on its frequency, intensity, quality, and/or urgency. 5) Evaluate whether the work is challenging enough and offers a sense of purpose. 6) Assess your own communication style, approachability, and supervisory skills to see whether improvements can lead to the changes the employee needs to make.

