



The Frontline Supervisor

June 2022

Q. Should it be part of a supervisor's responsibilities to help employees pursue work-life balance? This is something that extends beyond the workplace and is personal for employees.

A. Technology can turn a job into a 24/7 experience, so a lack of work-life balance can be a challenge. This strain contributes to lower productivity and burnout. It is up to employees to "hit the off switch," but some are better at doing it than others. This makes awareness and education about work-life balance a worthy pursuit. Practice establishing traditions that facilitate work-life balance. One tradition might be having everyone agree to not respond to emails and work-related texts after business hours, except in specific circumstances. (This could influence employees to be more done during regular business hours.) Brainstorm other work-life balance ideas. Celebrate and reward participation in these practices. A Web search of "ways to achieve work-life balance" will lead you to many ideas. Consider input from your human resources advisor, too. Suggest the EAP to employees who demonstrate struggles with work-life balance. Note that motivating employees to practice work-life balance will not be effective unless you are doing it yourself.

Q. I have known supervisors who were great listeners and advice givers. But what if the supervisor actually has professional counseling experience? Does this create an exception to the rule of avoiding delving into an employee's problems and taking on the counseling role?

A. Employees who raise concerns about personal problems with supervisors often have more than one reason for doing so. One, of course, may be a sincere desire to find a solution. But consider the high likelihood that similar discussions have taken place many times before with others outside the workplace, particularly with family and friends. It follows that an employee's desire to focus on solving a personal problem is in part motivated by a need to shift attention away from any performance issue and its consequences. A discussion about the nature of a personal problem and its resolution would certainly be more satisfying. Even if the supervisor has the skills to help the employee, engaging in the problem-solving process ultimately requires follow-up. These include, motivational counseling, relapse prevention, and detection by the counselor as to whether treatment is being accomplished, or whether it is being resisted or applied in only half measures. It is unrealistic for a supervisor engage in these elements of problem resolution, and risk increases when supervisors play the counseling role.

Q. If my employee is experiencing frequent absences from work and I make a supervisor referral to the EAP, is it enough to let the EAP know the employee is being referred and the reason? What other information would be helpful for the EAP to know?

A. EAPs have extensive experience helping employees with problems, many of which are associated with different absenteeism patterns. The more information you provide about the history of the employee's attendance issue and your attempts to resolve it, the more effective the EAP interview will be. This means a faster resolution to the problem. Problematic employee absenteeism may be ongoing and consistent, cyclical, or sudden and unexpected. Each includes different degrees and forms of communication (or lack of it) with the employer concerning the absences. This history gives the EAP clues about the nature of any personal problem that may be associated with the absences, even when an employee is not completely forthcoming in an interview. For example, an employee who suddenly does not show up for work and does not phone in, and whom you can't reach, will have a personal problem far different than that of an employee who phoned you the night before with notice that they were taking unapproved leave without pay.

Q. At times, I do not think employees truly understand the purpose of an EAP. Sure, they know it is a professional source of counseling and referral, but when supervisors refer, some employees become defensive. What is missing, and how can supervisors make formal referrals go a little smoother?

A. When a supervisor suggests the EAP or makes a referral, it can be helpful to explain early on that the basis for your recommendation is job performance, not your belief that a personal problem exists, and that all EAPs work this way. This issue, perhaps more than any other, is what prompts defensiveness. Also, do not mention the EAP for the first time late in the process of an attempt to correct performance. If weeks and months of difficulty, arguing, or tension have existed, your employee may believe that your motivation for referring now is to "cover your bases" as you prepare for termination of the worker.

Q. I strive to know my employees well so I can assess their needs and develop their talents. When employees do not perform well or keep commitments, or come to work late, I feel taken advantage of and angry. This causes me stress. How can I react differently?

A. Perhaps you have heard the expression, "Employees are our organization's most valuable resource." It offers a clue to help you understand how best to work with employees when they disappoint you. Wanting your employees to be happy and productive is a good thing, and the EAP plays a key role in helping you do this, but you will use the EAP less when you are emotional and feel personally hurt in response to employees not living up to your expectations. When you use the "employees are a resource" paradigm, you respond differently. You become more strategic, and this means a possible referral to the EAP sooner. Viewing your employees as ungrateful invites you to take their shortcomings personally, experience more stress, delay referral to the EAP, and be angry with them. You feel taken advantage of, and the risk is that you will experience a desire to retaliate, terminate, or "teach them a lesson."

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

