



June 2023

The Frontline Supervisor

Q. I spoke with the employee assistance professional about my employee's performance issues prior to referral, and I suggested what might be going on with the employee psychologically. Will this cause a problem? Was it improper?

A. When speaking with an EA professional, the information you provide related to performance issues, attitude, conduct, attendance, and quality and quantity of work is relevant and helpful to understanding. However, there is no requirement that you censor your thoughts or concerns about what might contribute to the employee's problems. The EAP recognizes that your opinion or judgment is just that, your personal thoughts and opinion, but they will not be relied upon to diagnose your employee. Additionally, your conversation is confidential. It is not unusual for people to deliberate with themselves about psychological dynamics that contribute to a person's problem. However, do not expect the EA professional to engage with you in a discussion about psychological matters concerning your employee. This would be inappropriate.

Q. I have two employees experiencing conflict, and it is disruptive to the workplace. Should I refer these employees to the EAP, or is it OK for a supervisor such as me to help these two employees resolve the conflict with a structured approach first?

A. Conflict in the workplace is normal, often helpful, and to be expected. Of course, some conflicts can be harmful to productivity and morale. This is why supervisors should understand the basics of conflict resolution. A short summary of one approach is to meet privately with each employee first. Identify common ground, the larger goal, and each employee's perspective. Identify the root cause of the conflict. In a joint meeting, allow each person to discuss their thoughts and concerns with active listening skills. Encourage brainstorming for a potential solution between the employees. Create an action plan and a follow-up approach with timelines and responsibilities for each participant. Later, check in with each employee to see whether the conflict has been resolved. Use the EAP as a resource if a conflict remains, because sometimes a personality style or other problems undermine the process described above. Each employee should understand that ongoing conflict would be a performance issue and that they have a responsibility to demonstrate teamwork, collaboration, and support for a positive workplace.

Q. My employee was referred to the EAP, but his work performance has not improved. There was no release signed, unfortunately, so I am feeling a bit stuck. He says things are fine with work at the EAP. That's great. It's not the same in the office. Now what?

A. Well-established principles of employee assistance programming provide that the EAP does not impede supervisory and management practices, so you have choices, although, from your point of view, they feel limited. One option is to meet with your employee again to address the performance issues and his plan to correct the problems you have documented. Whether or not your employee is participating in the EAP and whether or not a release was signed are irrelevant in this meeting. You must decide how long you are willing to ignore the performance problems. If the employee insists that he is working on his issues at the EAP, you may ask the employee to sign a release so you can verify his participation. This would also facilitate your communication with the EAP concerning ongoing performance problems. This may influence a different course or direction for the EAP's intervention, but ultimately you, along with advisors, are in control of what to do next.

Q. I attempted to refer my employee to the EAP because of interpersonal conflicts she frequently experiences. Unfortunately, I got talked out of it because she didn't think the EAP could help. I am giving her another chance. Should I have insisted?

A. You're using the EAP to help you resolve a performance issue with an employee. In this corrective interview, you decided not to follow through with a formal referral, but it does not mean you can't return to this discussion later. Your employee may not be fully aware of how the EAP can help, or she is resistant to getting help for the problems she has that affect performance. It is likely that after an interview of this type, you will see a period of days or weeks when performance is more than satisfactory. The urgency of the situation plays a role in this change. This is a good thing, but if personal issues that affect performance remain, then problems are likely to return. If this happens, simply pick up where you left off.

Q. What problems are caused by a supervisor who decides they simply do not have enough time to deal with an employee's poor performance issues?

A. It is generally expected that supervisors will prioritize addressing employee problems, but one consequence of putting personnel problems on the back burner is that other employees notice it. This leads to the general belief that subpar work will be tolerated. It also sends a message that employees don't have to worry about being accountable. Many of these secondary problems will not be noticeable early on, but over the course of weeks and months, productivity will suffer. This can obviously lead to decreased morale, increased turnover, and other behavioral risks. Often the most valuable workers leave the organization because it is easier for them to do so. Dominoes just keep falling. There are many reasons a supervisor might put off confronting a troubled worker, but the EAP can help supervisors examine whatever issues might contribute to such a problem.

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