



# The Frontline Supervisor

July 2020

**Q.** Should I worry about increased substance abuse among employees returning to work after a long absence due to our state's stay-at-home order? Perhaps those with addiction or abuse issues might have used more heavily (or relapsed) without a job to worry about, right?

**A.** Addicts in effective recovery programs do not relapse simply because they are not at work for an extended period of time. Indeed, recovering persons who value their sobriety may take measures to reinforce their recovery programs during a stressful time. Your drug-free workplace policies and procedures are adequate to manage employees who may have increased their drug use or, indeed, relapsed during this period. Being more aware of drug and alcohol abuse or increasing your vigilance has never been proven an effective way of spotting substance abusers. The steps you should therefore take include focusing on attendance, quality of work, availability, conduct, attitude, quantity of work, and other measurable elements of job performance. There simply is no better way to identify troubled workers, including those with substance abuse problems, aside from behaviors that would substantiate reasonable suspicion of being under the influence.

**Q.** There are so many changes and transitions regarding how we may need to do our work differently in terms of remote work, distancing, and the way we do meetings. How can I use the EAP to help with these changes?

**A.** The EAP can offer you and your coworkers several options for examining the dramatic changes and new workplace realities that you and most companies are experiencing right now. One service involves individual assessment, problem solving, and referral if needed to examine specific work challenges you personally face. Other services include facilitating group meetings to discuss and examine new and effective work practices for managing stress, facilitating communication, offering ideas and tips on performance management, resolving conflicts, and helping work teams stay on top of problems and issues that might interfere with or undermine productivity and job satisfaction. What makes the EAP a unique resource is confidentiality provisions that allow it to collectively understand better than any other resource how the employer and employees are responding and adapting to the new workplace. The EAP is therefore the ideal consultant to help the workforce maximize its productivity.

Q. I have an employee who, after time off, is thinking about a career change. How can the EAP assist with this?

A. Presumably, you do not wish to lose this valuable worker. The EAP is a voluntary resource, of course, but it does not mean you can't encourage this employee to visit the EAP and discuss his or her decision. It's confidential, it's free, and it might yield information that helps the worker avoid overlooking easily resolved issues that could lead to retention, improved job satisfaction, and obvious cost savings to the employer. Although the EAP may not be able to disclose the true reasons for an employee's departure, organizational issues affecting the departing worker could apply to other employees who are at risk of leaving. With permission, these larger issues might be shared with the organization, and this could hasten the implementation of new policies or administrative considerations to resolve them. This would positively affect the bottom line.

Q. Can I make a formal supervisor referral of an employee who has anxiety about COVID-19 but is ambivalent about reaching out to the EAP?

A. Formal supervisor referrals to an EAP are always based on job performance, so you may wish to consult with the EAP to discuss this situation prior to your next step. The key would be to identify the performance issue that makes a formal referral appropriate. Is your employee behaving in a way that interferes with productivity? A formal referral is conceivable if anxiety prompts the employee to repeatedly spend unacceptable amounts of time engaging with coworkers and interfering with their work. A strongly encouraged self-referral may be all it takes, but let the EAP help you with the proper approach or dialogue for doing it. Formally referring employees to the EAP for problems unrelated to performance can cause concern among employees and unwittingly encourage them to hide symptoms of their personal problems.

Q. Recently, we laid off quite a few staff because of financial difficulties in the company. It has created a fairly significant grief reaction among surviving workers. How can our work unit manage this grief reaction?

A. After a layoff, surviving employees will experience stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). Helping managers understand how these stages manifest among the workforce can enable them to respond more effectively to employees. EAP education for supervisors about on-the-job behaviors exhibited by downsizing survivors can also help them respond appropriately and offer referrals to the EAP if necessary. Not all employees will be in the same stage of grief at the same time. While some will focus their anger on management, particularly upper management, and will distrust supervisors, other employees will experience anxiety and fear that they are next, stress, burnout, insecurity, and decreased morale. Give employees space, time, and opportunity to talk. Communication—plenty of it and opportunity for it—is crucial for the healing process. Consistent with this need, team building can be helpful after a layoff to bring employees closer together, along with resiliency training to empower employees to cope better with future layoffs.