



The Frontline Supervisor

August 2020

Q. Many employees are now working remotely. Is it appropriate to offer tips and guidance on being productive at home, even if those ideas involve me telling the worker how to engage with family members to keep them from undermining productivity?

A. Supervising remote workers may have suddenly become more commonplace throughout the world, but it is nothing new. The supervisor-supervisee relationship is unique in each circumstance, so the relationship and quality of communication established with your employee should guide your discussions and the degree to which you offer directive guidance in dealing with work problems at home that may be attributed to family members. The last thing you should do is offer guidance or tips that pit the worker against his or her family. This is one battle you won't win. When you sense family members are non-supportive or distracting to productivity, consider recommending the EAP. Resist invitations to process the employee's frustrations and conflicts with family members. However, general tips about workflow, meeting objectives, managing time, getting things done, and overcoming distractions are all fair-game topics for supervisors.

Q. I learned in an alcohol education course that some alcoholics in withdrawal might drink products containing alcohol that are not meant to be ingested, like mouthwash, cologne, or other substances. How dangerous is this practice? How often does it happen?

A. You are describing what is known as drinking "surrogate alcohol." Surrogate alcohol refers to products containing some sort of alcohol not meant to be consumed. Mouthwash is the most common example, but there are dozens of others. All are poisonous. People may consume surrogate alcohol in a desperate attempt to ward off agitating withdrawal symptoms. Some relapsed alcoholics have consumed mouthwash to avoid detection by family members or coworkers. It is a dangerous practice because mouthwash contains ingredients not meant to be digested and that can be harmful. Alcoholism counselors will periodically encounter patients who admit to drinking surrogate alcohol. Mass poisonings involving surrogate alcohol sometimes occur. Scores of Russians died in Siberia in 2014 and 2016 by drinking methanol unwittingly sold to them by locals following the Russian government's taxation of beverage alcohol in an effort to control consumption. (Source: Radio Free Europe www.frerl.org Irkutsk mass methanol poisoning)

Q. Can I refer an employee to the EAP for being too much of a perfectionist? He turns projects in late. I will admit they are of high quality, and in fact are better than most, but they are not worth the delays. He calls himself a perfectionist, but I think it's an excuse.

A. Employees who claim to be perfectionists have an “advantage”: Who can blame them for wanting to be perfect? This reaction offers the clue to their motivation. Typically, the main motivation is avoiding criticism. Perfectionist employees may spend inordinate amounts of time tweaking the last 10% of a project, thus causing delays in delivery. Not all are motivated by the same goals, so avoid diagnosing them. Telling your employee that “done is better than perfect” may allow the worker to make the necessary behavioral shift. In practical terms, there are no true perfectionists who live up to their view of what they would like to achieve. Refer your employee to the EAP based upon performance issues, not perfectionism. (You may discover that this is an easily corrected behavior.) The EAP will help your employee. For example, fear of criticism may be an issue, but the real problem may be fear of vulnerability in work and personal relationships.

Q. Is it okay for supervisors to discuss psychological techniques for feeling better when employees are having a bad day, or offer employees tips on coping with stress? What about sadness over a relationship breakup? Sometimes referring them to the EAP does not feel like the right response.

A. Conversations with employees may broach personal challenges faced at work and at home, relationships issues, or internal personal struggles. Offering practical tips for coping with stress that you have personally found useful, or demonstrating empathy along with suggesting stress-relieving ideas, does not interfere with your role as a manager or cross boundaries that would impede your employee seeking help with a personal problem at the EAP. Suggesting employees take a break, calm down, look at things a different way, or check out a book you have found helpful is not what's referred to by those who suggest “avoiding diagnosing or counseling workers.” Do promote the EAP, however, and discount your suggestions as ultimate solutions, and avoid ongoing advising on problems. Never hesitate to contact the EAP with a question about your role and what's appropriate, and for guidance on what to say or do next with an employee's concern.

Q. Many supervisors don't appreciate the value of performance reviews in developing workers. Many view the process as a chore, which leads to its being postponed or delayed. What can help supervisors feel excited or feel more urgency about completing them?

A. All employees have unique gifts and skills waiting to be discovered. Much of this is a lifelong process of discovery, and supervisors are in a unique position to spot these abilities and encourage and develop them. Reviews offer these opportunities, and employees are cheated without an effective relationship with the supervisor that helps discover their true potential. Many employees will not spot how much they have learned, be able to articulate their skills, or grow in confidence without feedback. The payoff for the company is having employees who desire to take more initiative, along with increased willingness to take risks, including bringing forth their own great ideas to solve problems. In addition, review time invariably brings up the topic of roadblocks, and often these are personal. The EAP can then be a resource for problem resolution.