



The Frontline Supervisor

August 2023

Q. My employee has been found sleeping at his desk several times. I am going to arrange a formal confrontation with him today. My question is, should I ask him to see his doctor, or refer him to the EAP? This must be some sort of medical or sleep disorder sort of problem.

A. You should refer your employee to the EAP. It's the approved resource recognized by your organization, and any other recommendation or referral by you to another source of help would be fraught with potential problems. Notice how mulling over the proper resource for your employee entails some diagnostic thinking. This is what supervisors are asked to avoid as they consider what's best in helping employees resolve performance or conduct problems. Sleeping at one's desk could be explained by a medical problem but also by a dozen other issues. Even if this problem is directly caused by a medical condition, referral to the EAP offers the employee and the organization significant advantages. For example, the EAP role will improve communication with the medical provider, perform follow-up, and help address any problems in the employee's life secondary to the sleep disorder. This makes it more likely the primary condition would be successfully treated and the employee will return to satisfactory performance.

Q. I have been a manager for over 20 years, but one thing that bothers me the most is gossip and office politics. It's a difficult thing to manage because you can't catch conversations involving gossip, and one can't read employees' minds. What else can a supervisor do?

A. Gossiping and office politics may be hard to control, but worse, this behavior can undermine a positive workplace. It can also interfere with your supervisor authority, decisions, and leadership responsibilities. Don't be passive. Be sure to model appropriate behavior, not participate in those behaviors you seek to curtail. Employees do respond to role modeling. Let employees know what you want and expect from them regarding conduct and other behavioral issues. At least once, gather your employees and address the importance of respectful communication and discourage gossip and negative politics. Also, be sure employees feel they can safely come to you with concerns, ideas, and feedback. The inability to do so often fuels workplace divisiveness. When you spot inappropriate behavior associated with negative communication, always address it right away. This also has a strong dampening effect. Talk to the EAP about education, awareness, and respectful communication resources.

Q. If there is one thing I dread, it's an employee coming to my office to tell me without warning that he or she has decided to quit. What can supervisors do to reduce the likelihood of employees suddenly quitting? Any way to be proactive with this issue?

A. Not every decision to quit a job is preventable, because many employees have paths for their careers where opportunities emerge and decisions to leave are compelling. Still, the supervisor can influence a work environment to maximize a worker's desire to stay. To reduce being surprised by resigning employees, try scheduling one-on-one meetings with employees so you can provide them feedback and discuss special concerns, understand their goals, and get a feel for how to best meet their needs. These meetings can be short "check-ins" that still give you the information you seek. Typically, employees interested in quitting a job show reduced engagement or verbalize dissatisfaction. Pay attention to these signals so you can address them quickly. There are many things managers can do to create workplaces conducive to employees staying in place for longer periods of time, but the communication model described above will lead you to discover most of them.

Q. I attempted to refer my employee to the EAP, but he insisted on going to a private therapist, believing he knew more about his problems than the EAP did and that an assessment would be a waste of time. He asked for approval, but I did not give it. What's next?

A. It would be inappropriate, of course, to approve or disapprove of your employee's decision to self-refer to a private therapist. You should only say the EAP resource is your recommendation. The employee assistance program exists to help employees with personal problems or concerns by way of self-referral or a supervisor referral; however, the process is voluntary. In this instance, you won't have the benefit of knowing whether the employee went to see a private therapist in the community or has a signed release confirming participation in any treatment recommendations. For now, focus on job performance. Perhaps it will improve, and this would conclude the history of problems you've experienced. However, if problems return, consider appropriate action consistent with your organization's policies and procedures. This might entail revisiting a formal supervisor referral of your employee to the EAP along with new motivation to attend.

Q. I have noticed over the years that employees almost universally think that the supervisor is "out to get them" or is "targeting them" when disciplinary actions are implemented. Hardly ever do they admit that their performance or conduct warranted actions taken. What explains this?

A. When employees face disciplinary actions, they naturally feel defensive. Feeling targeted or unfairly pursued by the supervisor helps protect the employee's ego and deflects responsibility and ownership for the behavior. It would be rare indeed for an employee to purposely do a poor job and then expect adverse consequences for it. Disciplinary actions therefore trigger strong emotions, including fear, and the need to search for someone to blame. This is particularly true if the employee knows of others with the same problem but they are not similarly held responsible. Also, it's possible an employee may lack self-awareness. Without self-awareness, it is tough to accept responsibility for performance issues. Employee defensiveness can make constructive confrontations difficult, but this is a good reason for supervisors to consult with the EAP so they can have assistance in formulating the right approach to confronting employees based on the circumstances.

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