



The Frontline Supervisor

October 2020

Q. Many supervisors with whom I have spoken have yet to make a referral of an employee to the EAP. I believe many see the EAP only as a source of help for troubled workers. What are they not fully understanding about the EAP and what it can do?

A. EAPs are often viewed mistakenly as programs that only address personal problems. Principles that govern the establishment of EAPs allow for much more. In fact, “confidential and timely problem identification/assessment services” for employees is the third such element in what is referred to as EAP “core technology” principles. Preceding it is “consultation with, training of and assistance to work organization leadership (managers, supervisors, and union officials) seeking to manage troubled employees, enhance the work environment, and improve employee job performance.” That is a lot to consider! In addition, this is item #1 in defining EAPs. Supervisors should consider how EAPs can help them be better managers, help workers improve performance, and help resolve “people problems.” Studies often show that poor workplace communication is every organization’s key productivity roadblock. EAPs can train on this topic, and consultation with EAPs is always confidential. Other issues may include stress management education, a multitude of wellness topics, increasing emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and tips for motivating workers, and dozens of other productivity improvement topics that can help supervisors.

Q. The political environment this election season is very contentious. My employees talk constantly about it, and it gets a bit testy. I do not mind political discussions; uncivil behavior, I cannot tolerate. Do you have tips for how I can help discussions remain civil?

A. Let your employees know how much you value workplace harmony and positive relationships between workers and that you will act to maintain these aspects of the workplace for everyone’s benefit. The most important resource is your own modeling. If you actively avoid political conversations, it will be recognized and modeled by others. Most employees naturally conform to behaviors that they perceive the management values. Intervene as appropriate, like you would with any offensive and disruptive behavior. Many supervisors believe free speech rights prevent them from prohibiting disruptive political discussions at work. This is generally not correct for private employers, but do always consult with an HR advisor to clarify what actions or recommendations, if any, they want you to follow.

Q. What are some of the problems I can expect with my employees who have become teleworkers or remote workers?

A. Some research shows that the most common complaint of remote workers is isolation. The inability to engage coworkers in a way that allows an accurate perception of the collective mindset of the workgroup is a stressor. Group video technology may be a solution to this problem by helping workers feel more cohesive and mutually understood. The need to experience “what everyone is thinking and feeling” is valuable for worker mental health and productivity. “Presenteeism” (working while sick) or feeling compelled to put in too many hours is an additional problem. Most remote employees understand the “net positive” aspects of their position, and working longer hours (not necessarily a good thing in the long run) is perceived as a way to avoid others’ doubts about their role or contribution. The EAP should be a top-of-mind resource for remote workers and promoted frequently to them so they can easily consider it when needed. Moreover, supervisors should consider productivity issues as reasons to suggest use of the EAP just as they would in a non-remote work setting. Source: www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com [search “teleworking stress”]

Q. My employee was very upset about a disciplinary action. I worried he was going to sue me. I recommended, in a supportive way, that he visit the EAP. I based the recommendation only on how upset he was, and assured him that the EAP would be a completely objective listener. Following the meeting with the EAP, he apologized!

A. Recommending your employee go to the EAP was a smart move. Doing so in the heat of anger may not have been easy, but your supportive approach was likely key to a receptive response. Lawsuits that are publicized — and the greater percentage of them that are settled out of court in undisclosed agreements — cost companies untold millions of dollars. The ability of an employee to vent to an empathetic listener whose only goal is to help restore the employee to fuller functioning and emotional wellness may well be one of the most cost-beneficial aspects of well-established, traditional employee assistance programming. Did the EAP help prevent an emotionally charged employment claim against the company? Very possibly.

Q. Without an EAP, employers can tolerate troubled employees or eventually terminate them when problems grow more severe. The EAP offers a third option. I understand this point. However, employees have always had the ability to seek help on their own, right? So what changes with an EAP in place?

A. Several dynamics are in play when establishing an EAP. 1) Employees have easier access to help without having to explore and research other sources that may not fit their particular problem. 2) An EAP is therefore a “pre-treatment” to discover the best solution path for the presenting problem. 3) EAPs know when to suggest better communication with the employer to improve the situation. They will recommend an employee (voluntarily) sign a release, if needed, to provide limited information validating EAP participation and follow-through with the program’s recommendations, particularly when performance issues are severe enough that job loss could become a concern. 4) EAPs work with the employee’s needs and the employer’s needs in mind. These are only a few of the positive EAP dynamics that make all the difference in salvaging workers and protecting the bottom line.