



The Frontline Supervisor

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Q. I have wondered about the EAP experience and employees getting attached to the counselor at the program but then perhaps not wanting to establish another relationship with the mental health professional to whom they are referred. Can you comment on this?

A. EAP employee-clients are assessed with “the end” in mind. This means assessing an employee to understand fully the nature of a problem, if any, contributing to job performance issues but not bonding with the client so thoroughly that referral to a specialist would be resisted and difficult. Trust is important, and so is the client’s willingness to disclose information, so a limited therapeutic engagement is important. This is another key professional skill important to well-functioning EAPs. Clients may be told directly that the goal is to understand the nature of the issues at hand and then get them to the right resource. This often has the intended effect of helping the client prepare for a resource referral without bonding with the EAP. The need to have several interviews in order to accurately gauge the client’s needs makes referral resistance more likely, but it is the skill of the EA professional that helps the employee get to the right resource.

Q. If an employee comes to the EAP with general complaints indicating they are depressed, I imagine such employees are referred to a medical doctor like a psychiatrist for further assessment. What else does the EAP do beyond determining the need to refer?

A. When an employee visits the EAP for symptoms of depression, much more happens than a routine depression screening. Typically, the EA professional will assess psychosocial or environmental/lifestyle issues that are either symptoms of the depression or distinct from, yet exacerbating the primary condition. These issues must be addressed or they risk undermining the work of the psychiatrist to whom the employee is referred. Many psychiatrists manage medications extremely well, but they often resist spending copious amounts of time helping the worker address the nonclinical issues. A team approach ultimately helps employees with these chronic disease conditions that cannot be treated without attention to the factors that may undermine medical care.

Q. EAPs do not provide legal advice, of course, but I hear they can reduce legal exposure with regard to managing difficult employees. How does this happen, if there are no lawyers on the EAP team?

A. Frequently, lawsuits arise out of an employee's belief that he or she is not being treated fairly in some way. Negative interactions with supervisors often contribute to motivation to eventually take action against the employer. Preventively, EAPs train supervisors, encourage early referrals, and engage employees in commonsense actions to raise their productivity and address personal problems. This constructive engagement often occurs long before tension and dysfunctional relationships on the job create risk where problems would ultimately have to be resolved by management actions. Although EA professionals do not profess to be completely knowledgeable about anti-discrimination, anti-harassment, and anti-retaliation laws in the same way a legal counsel might, the natural role they play obviously touches on many aspects of the supervisor-employee relationship that are reflected in these laws.

Q. What is a key method to keep an employee from becoming defensive when confronted with ongoing work quality, conduct, or attendance problems?

A. There are many aspects of the corrective interview that can lead to an employee's unfavorable reaction to being confronted with poor performance, but one overlooked approach is the use of the supervisor's prior documentation in the history of addressing the performance problem. Prior documentation, known to the employee and may have also been acknowledged with a signature, is one of the most certain ways to gain cooperation. Without it, the supervisor is forced to rehash prior discussions from memory, and these stories may be less accurate when recalled than the notes and documentation that have been previously accepted and agreed to.

Q. I know how to formally refer an employee to the EAP, no problem. However, is it helpful to speak to the EAP anyway before I make a formal referral?

A. Although there is no fast rule regarding consulting with the EAP beforehand regarding a formal referral, there are advantages to doing so. Even if you know how to help arrange a referral, use documentation effectively, and communicate later when following up, every referral to an EAP involves an employee whose issues are unique. Employee assistance professionals are extremely attuned to performance issues and the nuances of how they present themselves in the workplace. This is where the art of the interview exists. Based on patterns you experience with an employee, an EA professional will make decisions about what interviewing techniques to employ. If you phone the EAP to inform the program about a pending referral and speak with a staff member about issues such as the type of interactions you have with your employee, prior cooperation, patterns of performance problems, environmental influences, and history of other concerns not relevant to the current matter, this may help the EA professional consider the assessment approach that will ultimately make the referral more successful.

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

