



The Frontline Supervisor

October 2023

Q. I provided elder care support to my mother for years. It was very stressful. Two of my employees are now in the same situation, and I can see their productivity slipping. I can refer them to the EAP, of course, but can I also give them advice? I am a “pro” at this whole issue.

A. If your employees’ performance is affected, it is appropriate to speak with each of them separately to address the decline and get it corrected. During these discussions, it’s likely they will share information about the difficult situation of taking care of an elderly parent. Your experience and any tips you can offer may prove invaluable, but you should also mention the EAP because of the abundance of resources the program may be able to offer. Offering a few tips from your experience is appropriate, and should not undermine use of the EAP, but what if their performance does not improve? In this case, follow up and reinforce the need to work with the EAP. Don’t ignore the lack of improved performance. If the situation gets worse, consult with the EAP if needed and arrange a formal referral. Although initially this problem appears straightforward, highly complex issues can still underlie the performance issues.

Q. There was a fire purposely set in our warehouse, but thankfully no one was injured. A few employees visited the EAP afterward because it was traumatic, and we think one of them might be the arsonist. Can we insist the EAP give us information to verify whether this is true?

A. Confidential laws and policy agreements that govern EAPs would preclude investigating or probing the program about its discussions with clients. Of course, your EAP would be required to properly disclose information to someone who was threatened in order to protect their life, stop child or elder abuse, or meet the requirements of other provisions specified by state law. The confidential nature of EAPs is damaged beyond repair when or if its confidential nature is ignored. These policy provisions were constructed prior to program inception. You should review them. You want employees, particularly the riskiest and most troubled workers, to readily seek help from the EAP to reduce risk and intervene in volatile problems. Remember, EAPs are ultimately programs of attraction. You do not want to undermine this dynamic and risk serious behavioral risk issues that would never be addressed otherwise. Confidentiality and the actual appearance of confidentiality are critical elements of the program’s sustainability and value.

Q. I am certain my employee can succeed, but he lacks confidence. What can I do as a supervisor to help him become more confident? The EAP would be completely unfamiliar with his job, so is a referral still appropriate if his uncertainty about how to perform his essential functions remains?

A. Although your employee's confidence can be undermined by many factors, some of which you may be unable to identify or manage, there are a few steps you can take to help him acquire a better attitude and the performance to match. Be sure you have provided clear expectations about the job and the outcomes you expect. This is a key issue seen by EAPs when employees are referred for underperformance. Offer feedback on achievements because positive reinforcement increases confidence. Help the employee identify small, achievable goals. Confidence grows with each success. Also, consider training, independent problem-solving, and mentoring. One powerful confidence builder often overlooked by supervisors is recognizing the effort employees expend in attempting to achieve goals. So, even when immediate successes are not visible, effort expended will reinforce confidence for another try. Let your employee know that building confidence is a process, a journey of sorts, and results are not instantaneous. Regarding the EAP, make a referral if confidence-building tips don't work, but speak with the EAP first to share a fuller picture of the employee's issues..

Q. My employee was once highly motivated—a real go-getter—but recently his energy seems to be gone. Should I explore this problem with him, or is it something I should not dive into and instead refer him to the EAP?

A. Ask your employee where his motivation has gone. See if there are practical reasons for it related to the job. Listen carefully for clues that point to potential solutions. For example, what goals is this employee working toward? Consider exciting new work goals to see if that rekindles his motivation. One common reason for demotivation is boredom. If this is it, come to an agreement on some challenging and interesting tasks that align with the employee's skills and interests. Does your employee work with a team? Isolation is a frequent motivation killer. If not, finding a way to assemble a team experience can help your employees discover motivation that results from workers who synergize. Encourage an EAP referral if your conversations do not prove fruitful.

Q. I referred two employees to the EAP because they experience frequent conflicts. I have not threatened disciplinary action and instead have asked that they be adults and resolve their issues, but it is not working. Am I doing anything wrong with this situation?

A. Asking employees to resolve differences can be difficult because neither party will initiate taking a constructive path to end the conflict. It takes a third party to help harmonize the workers. The EAP is a good choice for this help. Start with a private conversation with each employee separately. Listen actively to their perspectives. Empathize, and don't judge either worker at this stage. Clearly communicate your expectations for professional behavior, respect, and mutual cooperation. Prior to a formal referral, discuss your impressions with the EAP and refer the employees. Each should sign a release. Schedule regular follow-up meetings with the employees to monitor their progress. Address any new issues immediately if they arise. Keep a record of the conflict and your efforts to resolve it. Let employees know you are doing so. This sends a message that the manager is serious about ending the conflict one way or another, and in turn, this motivates the employees to seek resolution and stay motivated to remain cooperative.

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