



# The Frontline Supervisor

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**Q. When should I be worried about an employee's mental health, especially concerning serious psychological symptoms, given that I am not qualified to diagnose or assess their stability?**

A. While it's essential to pay attention to the broad scope of your employee's performance issues, certain performance problems are more commonly associated with individuals experiencing significant emotional challenges. A noticeable drop in the quality or quantity of work, including missed deadlines and increased errors are more common. Some employees may struggle with procrastination or fail to meet performance targets because accomplishing tasks requires a full range of skills and emotional competencies to remain focused and complete work on time. Employees dealing with mental health issues may lack the necessary emotional resources to effectively manage their workload, leading to delays, missed deadlines, and decreased productivity. These same competencies and their diminished availability to the employee will also affect their attendance, moods, self-control over thoughts, and emotional responses to workplace stressors, and possibly their dress or appearance.

**Q. My employee frequently apologizes for poor performance but shows high productivity after each apology. Unfortunately, it doesn't last. I am finally making an EAP referral. What might be the cause of this sort of behavior?**

A. Of course, a formal referral is the only way to truly determine what underlies this behavior, but remember, even with a release, the EAP won't disclose the nature of the personal problem. Generally speaking, however, these extremely wild swings between stellar and poor performance are sometimes associated with bipolar disorder, which involves alternating episodes of mania (or hypomania) and depression, where coming to work would feel nearly impossible because of low energy, lack of motivation, and difficulty concentrating. Substance use disorders can also be the cause of the behavioral pattern you describe. Or other illnesses or psychosocial problems may explain the pattern you describe. Apologizing has worked because it has delayed your decision to take serious action. Unfortunately, this can reinforce the pattern. It's obviously important not to delay an EAP referral when observing behaviors of this type. Doing so may increase risk to the work unit and organization.

**Q. I referred an employee to the EAP but did not ask that a release be signed. After the first appointment, I asked my employee to sign a release so I would be kept apprised of participation. He agreed, but I have not heard from the EAP yet. Should I call?**

A. Yes, phone the EAP because it will help ensure that the referral process is effective and that the employee receives the necessary support. A signed release formalizes the relationship between the employee, you, and the EAP. Of course, the release allows the EAP to communicate limited but relevant information back to you. Knowing that there is a formal agreement in place motivates your employee to take their appointments seriously, as they understand that their commitment is being monitored. Effective communication while your employee is participating in the EAP also shows your commitment to their well-being and the organization's support. Although the employee may not be pleased about being confronted and referred to the EAP, recognizing your investment in their growth and recovery can positively influence their feelings toward both you and the organization.

**Q. I tried to help resolve a dispute between two employees and got very emotional about the issues we were discussing. I wanted to take a neutral position but admit it was difficult. How do managers stay neutral, not pick sides, and demonstrate impartiality?**

A. The supervisor skill you're referring to is the ability to maintain composure and objectivity in serious conflicts among employees, especially when disrespect and emotional volatility are exhibited. This is called staying above the fray. Knowing how to adopt a neutral and detached position is easier if you understand the advantages of doing so. First, this skill helps you keep your cool and focus on finding solutions. As a supervisor, you must clearly communicate expectations, actively listen to all parties without bias, and build trust among conflicting employees. When employees feel their concerns are taken seriously without favoritism, they are more likely to express their grievances. This reduces risk to the work organization. Your neutrality also prevents conflicts from escalating. When employees perceive a supervisor as biased, it undermines credibility and authority, which are difficult to reestablish. To enhance your conflict resolution skills, consider consulting the EAP for best practices. Also, if available, offer employees the option to resolve differences through the confidential venue afforded by the EAP.

**Q. I am a new supervisor. What is the greatest challenge I will face as I take on this role?**

A. Cultivating a leadership mindset is one of the most important and challenging things to do. This refers to the attitudes and beliefs that shape your behavior and how you interact with others. Someone with a leadership mindset remains flexible and open to new ideas, viewing change not as a threat but as an opportunity for growth. A leadership mindset accepts that decisions must often be made quickly and effectively without the luxury of bouncing ideas off others. Additionally, a leadership mindset accepts responsibility when things go wrong but shares credit with others for successes. A leadership mindset develops a vision for the work unit, and it inspires and motivates employees to follow the leader to achieve it. Lastly, good leaders always think in terms of fostering a healthy and positive work environment, one that is inclusive, where everyone's perspective is encouraged and valued, and where employees feel a collaborative environment that welcomes their creativity. Embrace the leadership journey! Remember that the EAP is available for the emotional hurdles you may experience.

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

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