



# The Frontline Supervisor

November 2020

**Q. This year has been difficult for many employees. None of us has gotten sick with COVID-19, but I have noticed lower levels of excitement among workers about their jobs and less engagement, meaning they are not as passionate, innovative, and initiating as they used to be. Is the pandemic to blame?**

A. Research recently shared by the American Psychological Association shows that the coronavirus pandemic has played a significant role in reducing employee engagement as you describe it. This is particularly true as it pertains to dying from the disease. Most employees may not voice this fear. Not all employees respond equally or manage this stress in the same way. Research shows that supervisors can play a pivotal role in helping employees cope and stay engaged when they perform as “servant leaders.” When you behave as a servant leader, you will be perceived by your employees as a good listener, a supervisor who shows empathy and awareness, and is persuasive and committed to everyone’s growth, while placing a priority on “everyone coming together,” pulling through this together as a family or community. Employees who said they had supervisors matching these traits remained more engaged.

Source: [www.psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2020-75403-001.html](http://www.psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2020-75403-001.html)

**Q. I have a friend who is also a supervisor. He says it is the supervisor’s job to help employees to correct performance, not the EAP. My friend also has an alcohol problem. Most of us know it. Could there be a connection between his awareness of an alcohol problem and avoidance of the EAP?**

A. Your supervisor-colleague may be avoidant of the EAP out of fear of being diagnosed or confronted about his drinking during the process of referring a troubled worker. Supervisors do not have to worry about their personal problems being confronted or examined by the EAP when making a referral. The EAP focuses only on helping the referred worker. To do otherwise would violate a principle called “client self-determination.” An EAP is voluntary. Its success depends on it being a “program of attraction.” Confronting supervisors as described would harm the EAP, erode trust, and therefore lower its utilization. Risk to the organization would increase.

**Q. What is the definition of reasonable suspicion? How do I know if what I am calling reasonable suspicion will later be upheld by any review or investigation of my role?**

A. Reasonable suspicion is not a hunch and is not pure evidence of probable cause. It is, however, a recognized legal standard of proof and is generally found in all drug-free workplace policies that include a component for referral for drug testing. Reasonable suspicion is always based on specific and articulable (can be clearly expressed in communication) facts. More precisely, reasonable suspicion must be based on specific, contemporaneous, articulable observations concerning the appearance, behavior, speech, or body odors of the employee. With the supervisor's documentation, rational inferences are drawn from those facts. Although not necessary, it is always a good idea to consider a checklist so all that can be documented is documented. By using a checklist that allows you to consider items you may have overlooked, your documentation is likely to be viewed more favorably if it is ever questioned because it possesses a preponderance of evidence, not just an item or two.

**Q. Should I expect an employee to act offended if they are referred to the EAP?**

A. Some employees may act offended if referred to the EAP because they believe you are making a declaration of a personal problem, mental illness, or addiction. This reaction is more likely among employees who do not understand the nature of employee assistance programs, have not participated in an orientation to understand the EAP, or do not remember what they were informed of when they did. Although you may have a firm understanding of how to use the EAP in supervision, which directs you to focus solely on performance and avoid the counseling role, the employee may not grasp this principle. To reduce the likelihood of an intractable response, it is helpful to tell your employee that referrals to the EAP by supervisors are based only on the performance issues relevant to your discussion, nothing more. Also, stress the confidential nature of the EAP, the non-inclusion of a record of the referral in a personnel file, and nothing about the presenting problem, if any, being given to you.

**Q. I am frustrated with my employee because I have suggested he get help at the EAP for whatever is going on in his life to resolve his attendance issues. Despite my dozen or so recommendations, he has not gone. So, it is time for me to take disciplinary action, right?**

A. You have probably noticed that your employee makes short-lived successful attempts at coming in on time after your discussions and pleading. These short-lived improvements usually indicate attempts by the worker to control symptoms of whatever is contributing to tardiness. Consider coordinating with your human resources advisor to discuss offering the employee a firm choice between accepting an EAP referral based on the attendance issues or accepting the appropriate disciplinary measure. The tone of this discussion should be one of concern and support, reinforcing what you see as the value of this worker, and how you are making an accommodation to assist him in correcting the attendance issue. This affirming attitude rather than a punitive one, along with the leverage afforded by the disciplinary action, will create strong urgency to accept the referral.