



The Frontline Supervisor

November 2021

Q. I am the manager of a library in a large city. Periodically, people living on the street wander in and may behave in disturbing ways. One threw a book on the floor recently. It was upsetting, and one employee took a sick day later because of it. Can the EAP help us manage this sort of stress?

A. Although most people think of libraries as quiet and serene job settings, they are public places. Many have security staff, but they cannot prevent all incidents. Support for staff can manage stress and reduce turnover. For employees who are upset, suggest seeing the EAP, or refer employees whose performance has been negatively affected in the aftermath of a “patron incident.” Ask the EAP to visit with your staff and educate them about mental illness. This can demystify and educate employees about mental illness in general and boost their resilience. It can be scary facing someone experiencing psychosis. They may become agitated, or have unpredictable behaviors. The EAP can offer suggestions for interacting with problem patrons, or you can discuss these incidents as a group to generate a set of protocols if such a plan does not currently exist. EAPs are versatile. Call on their ability to help you in creative ways.

Q. Is there research that points to marijuana’s adverse effect on productivity in the workplace? Most people know about the impact of alcoholic workers and the high costs associated with alcohol abuse. Cannabis does not seem to have the same amount or degree of information.

A. Research on the adverse impact and cost of cannabis use in the workplace exists, but it is not as plentiful or as widely shared as research on alcoholism and alcohol abuse. This is explained in part by the large difference in research funding related to alcohol abuse and alcoholism and the length of time such funding has been available. Additionally, there is no “alcohol lobby” with a substantive goal of discrediting alcohol research, unlike the marijuana lobby, which actively seeks to discredit unfavorable research on cannabis. A 2020 research study on the adverse effects of marijuana use in the workplace showed that cannabis use before and during work negatively relates to task performance and organization-aimed “citizenship behaviors” (willingness to help others), and it contributes to counterproductive work behaviors. The study was published in “Group and Organization Management Journal” May 2020.

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Q. I think most employees do not like hearing negative feedback, even if they are sitting calmly and listening to it. This awareness, in my opinion, causes supervisors to avoid giving feedback or even avoid annual reviews. This is not fair to employees. Any tips for this problem?

A. Few employees enjoy negative feedback, but your goal as a supervisor is not to make negative feedback painless but to make it understood and effectively communicated so it is useful. Follow these steps. 1) Be sure your employees know the goals and objectives of their position. A complaint commonly heard by EAPs is “I don’t know what my boss wants me to do.” 2) Make corrective feedback tangible and measurable so employees can gauge their progress. 3) Don’t lecture or criticize employees personally. 4) Give feedback soon and often so, your employees never “wonder” what you are thinking about their performance. 5) Always mention the positive aspects of an employee’s performance. Doing so will not undermine the corrective feedback. Just the opposite. It will increase your employee’s receptivity to the negative feedback. 6) Discuss what change and success will look like if the feedback is acted on. This gives the employee a specific goal to work toward.

Q. Why does enabling of alcoholic employees happen even if coworkers are well-educated about these behaviors? Everyone in our company has had alcohol and drug awareness training. Enabling was thoroughly discussed. A few of my colleagues socialize with those they know are alcoholics but say nothing.

A. Those most familiar with an alcoholic’s personal life will naturally practice more enabling behaviors. Coworkers may benefit socially from the drinking pattern, excitement around it, and the social leadership an early-stage alcoholic may exhibit. Parties are livelier, jokes louder, and creative ideas for fun may always be at the ready. These enabling friends may hesitate to confront the alcoholic because they know change will jeopardize their social life and prompt loss of what has been valued. Enablers may explain away this unwillingness to confront the alcoholic by viewing the drinking pattern as “functional alcoholism,” which is characteristic of the enabler’s own denial. On the positive side, these same individuals often have great influence when a crisis occurs and treatment becomes necessary. Their ability to speak directly and convincingly can motivate the alcoholic to accept help. They are valuable players in interventions.

Q. Our company engages in a lot of after-hours socializing. It’s part of our work culture. Customers are always included. Drinking and a bit of rowdiness are not unusual. I am nervous about sexual harassment. No incident has occurred, but I would like to prevent one from ever happening. Any tips?

A. The casual atmosphere and drinking may be a risk issue for your organization, especially if there are expectations that employees participate. It is important that employees be aware of the sexual harassment policy and their responsibilities. There must be prompt reporting and communication with a trained manager if an incident occurs. Customers are the lifeblood of your company. If they act inappropriately, you will be at risk of minimizing their behaviors out of fear of offending them. This is an important awareness. Employees who experience behaviors they believe are offensive or unwanted should not be subtly discouraged from complaining. There is much to consider when employees and managers socialize after hours. Boundaries may feel loosened, but corporate responsibility is not. Consider having your EAP provide sexual harassment refresher training periodically if this is part of its role. This can help employees and demonstrate your commitment to a safe and positive workplace.

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