

Front Line Supervisor Newsletter, Issue 1



Frequently Asked Questions

Call Health Promotion Northwest EAP for more support at 360-788-6565.

Q: *Performance problems have returned with an employee I referred to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) three months ago, although he cooperated with its recommendations at that time. Should I take action or should I contact the EAP again?*

A: You should decide what the supervisory response to your employee's continuing performance problems should be. The EAP cannot recommend nor discourage a disciplinary response, but it can still be helpful. Consider informing the EAP that problems have emerged again. If the consent for the release of confidential information is still valid, find out whether the employee is still cooperating with EAP recommendations. Depending on the circumstances, the type of performance problems you're facing, and what can be shared by the EAP, you'll feel more certain about the type of response you decide upon. Remember, it's your responsibility to decide what your next step will be. The EAP is not a "safe harbor" for ongoing performance problems. This is difficult for some supervisors to remember when the pressure's on. As a result, they lose the opportunity to respond and further tolerate an up-and-down performance pattern.

Q: *My employee accuses me of being unfair and singling her out. I believe I am fair, but these statements cause me to back off. Unfortunately, her problems are getting worse. How can I feel more secure?*

A: Try working more closely with your own supervisor or even your human resources office to respond appropriately to your employee's job performance problems and her accusations of how she is being treated. Certainly, the goal is to get the performance that is legitimately required. Your employee may have learned an effective way to keep you from taking action with her or she might be pointing out an accurate observation about your supervision, or both. Share your documentation with your supervisor and discuss your supervision techniques. Accept any feedback that might be offered about your supervision style or communication. Get support for the plan you decide upon and include the EAP in the steps you take toward correcting this employee's performance problems.

Q: *I understand that alcohol and drug problems are costly problems for business and industry, but why is it so difficult for managers to identify poor job performance and refer such employees?*

A: Employees with chemical dependency problems are unable to consistently control the time, place, and amount of alcohol or drug use. Behavior will eventually interfere with job performance, attendance, or quality of work. It can occur quickly in the case of some drug problems, but could take 15 to 20 years to become apparent for some alcoholic employees. This is frustrating for employers and also for the chemically dependent worker, who may do whatever is necessary to make up for job performance shortcomings. This explains the up-and-down performance pattern, improved performance that follows a corrective interview, or extra assignments that might be gladly accepted or requested. In response supervisors tend to grade on a performance curve, real or imagined, that is higher than actually deserved. In effect, the troubled employee's coping strategy to avoid confrontation works. Combine this pattern with well-practiced defenses used to explain other performance discrepancies, and you can easily see how difficult it can be to manage this type of employee.

Q: *I'm a new manager, and I can't seem to let go of all the problems and concerns when I leave the office at night. How can I separate my work worries from my personal life?*

A: Detaching work life from one's personal life without mentally drifting back to work concerns is a vital skill for effective managers. The basic love of supervision is the foundation of an effective plan. Such managers are more likely to see work problems as challenges, not threats to their personal integrity. In other words, if you don't like what you're doing, no coping strategy is likely to work that well. Here are a few guidelines for success. First, decide to separate work concerns from your personal life. Second, focus

on making your personal life so meaningful that work does not easily replace it. Third, experiment with creative stress management techniques that support your after-hours emotional detachment. Fourth, develop stress-reducing work habits, such as making timely decisions, rather than lingering over them. Fifth, establish rules that help you separate work from home. Your EAP can help you with any part of your coping strategy.

Q: *I have an employee whose tone of voice is cynical. She gives the cold shoulder to some and seems arrogant. Her skills are excellent, but how can I identify and label this behavior in an objective manner?*

A: These terms are subjective, because you are interpreting nonverbal communication and her tone to define them. Such behavior is difficult to pin down because it is not plain to see. Identifying the impact of the behavior is the place to start. You must measure this impact by using descriptive language. If other employees are complaining, do they appear affected? If so, ask them to explain how this behavior affects them. Has it affected their morale or productivity? Do they avoid the employee? Has their interest in coming to work decreased? Are they unable to concentrate? These things can be documented and are evidence of interpersonal relationship and attitude problems that can be more easily addressed.