

Front Line Supervisor Newsletter, Issue 2



Frequently Asked Questions

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

Q: *I gave a letter to my employee detailing his job performance problems and referred him to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). I then sent a copy of that letter to the EAP. Should I also speak with the EAP professional, or will the letter suffice?*

A: It is usually helpful to contact the EAP and discuss your employee's job problems before making a supervisor referral. Although your letter may be complete, it is not a substitute for discussing what feedback may be expected from the EAP and your observations and interactions with your employee. Discussion will make the anticipated EAP interview with your employee more effective. For example, if your employee is frequently tardy, the EAP may want to discuss when this occurs, whether the employee phones to let you know, the excuses he uses, and the pattern of tardiness between corrective interviews. Answers to these questions will help the EAP begin to consider the nature of the personal problem. Employees referred to EAPs often ask, "Have you spoken to my supervisor?" If the EAP can answer, "yes," a more forthcoming interview with the employee is likely.

Q: *We recently terminated an employee with chronic performance problems. He had been with the company for 25 years. We warned him many times that this could happen and urged him to visit the EAP. What possibly went wrong?*

A: Examining forced terminations for lessons that might be learned from them is a good idea. No company can salvage every troubled worker. Employees with long work histories and long-term problems may be at greater risk of losing their jobs for performance-related problems if confrontation is not carefully managed. Such employees sometimes believe their history with the company insulates them from severe disciplinary actions. This belief can be reinforced if threats of termination or other actions are repeated without follow-through. Such "organizational enabling" is eventually followed by a sudden incident that triggers the termination action. Your employee was threatened for years, but by the time the final blow came, his denial and resistance to seeking help were probably deeply ingrained. A clear and firm choice between referral to the EAP or going forward with a disciplinary action can frequently shake denial and motivate employees to accept help.

Q: *Two employees told me in confidence about their coworker's prescription drug addiction, which could explain the numerous sick days she takes. Should I mention something about what I've learned and refer her to the EAP?*

A: Obtaining guidance from the EAP and your human resources representative will help ensure that you manage this situation properly and act in conformance with existing policy. Generally, supervisors can't use second-hand information for any official purpose. Likewise, it would be inappropriate for you to initiate a discussion about it. The attendance problems with your employee give you justification for making a supervisor referral to the EAP, and you may feel more anxious than ever to do it. The referral should be based solely on attendance, however, not on unsubstantiated behavioral or medical problems. Even if a drug addiction problem exists, it isn't necessarily the cause of her attendance difficulties. Consider encouraging the two employees to visit the EAP for guidance about an appropriate role they might play in assisting a friend and a coworker.

Q: *My employee was treated for alcoholism seven years ago and I recently saw him drinking alcohol at an office party. I couldn't resist asking him about it, but he said he can handle it. Now what?*

A: Understandably, you are concerned about the severity of your employee's relapse and its consequences. However, focusing on the relapse and confronting your employee about it is not your role as a supervisor. Your focus should be on work productivity issues. Is your employee performing to expectations? Or are there problems with attendance, quality of work, or behavior? The presence or lack of performance problems

should guide your actions with this employee. As an addiction grows worse, it includes a future of predictable crises at home or work. So, your employee should eventually experience job performance problems. However, it is not possible to predict when this will occur or when it will be noticeable. In the future, use only work-related problems to confront your employee and refer him to the EAP. Consult with the EAP as needed in the future.

Q: *I am a team leader and would like suggestions about what role I can play to enhance and increase the cohesiveness and success of my work team.*

A: The team approach to workplace productivity is gaining rapid popularity in American work culture. The most important way to enhance the productivity of your team is to ensure that meetings are productive. Although the cry of "too many meetings" is common, some employees on work teams don't get enough. Meetings should be viewed as tools not only for solving problems, but also for practicing team-building skills such as sharing control, learning assertiveness, supporting others, sharing information, recognizing group achievement, and building cohesiveness through vulnerability and trust. The EAP can assist team leaders (supervisors, managers, foremen, and other business executives) who are unable to demonstrate these skills in their team meetings. A lack of such skills is a reason for the ultimate failure of many work teams.