

SOLUTIONS

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Question: To foster creativity among my staff, I encourage teamwork so that people can share ideas. But that doesn't seem to work for a couple of my employees who tend to be too individualistic. Should I refer these two to the EAP or treat them differently?

Answer: Try giving them what they need first. Teamwork serves many purposes and, when necessary, it is vital that employees learn to work on teams to achieve organizational goals. However, teams often won't maximize employees' creative contributions. Organizations that emphasize individual achievement over teamwork will often spur more innovation from their staff, according to a new study published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (May 2006), a research journal. That's because teamwork leads to conformity, and creativity thrives when independent individuals get to think for themselves and express their differences. Try making room for nonconformists. Encourage people to speak freely and follow their own schedules. Provide quiet areas for contemplation. Some companies set up an "idea room" filled with flip charts, brainteaser games and headphones so that employees can relax and think.

Question: A few of my employees have family members stationed overseas in the military. They are worried, but they do their best. How can I help them? Should I refer them to the EAP?

Answer: The EAP can provide support for your employees and help them with their anxieties. EAP professionals will not only listen and offer support, but may also recognize sleeping, eating or work-related problems that are by-products of your employees' frequent worrying. As their supervisor, you should understand that your employees might behave uncharacteristically during this difficult time. If they're unusually angry, irritable or absentminded, it may be because of their anxiety. Your patience and compassion can help everyone cope. Be willing to listen intently if they open up. Above all, don't tell them not to worry so much or insist that everything will be fine. Your well-meaning attempt to reassure them can backfire because they know their loved ones are at risk, and you cannot protect them.

Question: I recently replaced a well-liked supervisor who died suddenly. I feel like I'll never come out from behind my predecessor's shadow. Can the EAP help?

Answer: The EAP can help you grapple with the inevitable discomfort that you face in this unusual situation. It's often hard to fill the shoes of a well-regarded supervisor. But the challenge is far greater and more complex when the person has died. Others—from employees to peers to bosses—will automatically



compare you to your predecessor. They may try outwardly to accept you on your own terms, but subconsciously they may feel negativity towards you or display awkwardness when relating to you. That's all beyond your control. But you can control your behavior. With the help of the EAP, you can discuss steps you can take to respect the person's memory while gradually carving out your own professional identity. For example, you can work with colleagues to organize an annual fundraiser as a tribute to your predecessor.

***Question:* When employees enter addiction treatment, is there a difference in outcome between those who are admitted with a sincere desire to get well versus those who are motivated to avoid a disciplinary action for problematic performance or behavior?**

Answer: Although both types of employees have different motivations for entering treatment, it is not possible to say who will be more successful in recovery and remain abstinent from drugs and alcohol. Supervisors and coworkers may be skeptical of the desire for admission by some employees who seem to make a sly move toward admission, but this skepticism is not well placed. Treatment is a powerful, life-changing event, and it can overtake addictive disease patients initially in strong denial upon admission, causing them to eventually desire a drug-free life. A strong association exists between workplace-related admissions and successful recovery, like those facilitated by EAPs. It has been closely observed by health professionals that when fear of job loss is present, an addictive disease patient's prognosis is good with support and follow up after treatment. This exciting discovery has led to the proliferation of employee assistance programs and has saved untold numbers of jobs and lives.

***Question:* My boss said that I need to be a more supportive supervisor. He couldn't give examples except to say "Your team has to feel you support them." What can I do?**

Answer: Look for opportunities to show that you're responsive to your team's needs. If team members ask for resources to help them produce results, fight on their behalf to fulfill their requests. If they struggle to work through a tough problem, acknowledge the difficulty of their task and praise their effort. Consider work rules regarding pay in your organization and what flexibility may be available. For example, if employees work lots of unpaid overtime, can you provide paid time off later? If no, what other options exist to support them? Your boss may also want you to boost your team's morale—to motivate employees to persevere amid adversity. The best way to focus workers on a challenging mission is to shower them with support. Spend time just listening to them. Learn about their fears, concerns and gripes. By paying attention to your team's comments, dignifying their views and championing their interests, they will feel supported, and you will earn their admiration.

***Question:* We terminated an employee for poor performance. He was participating in the EAP at the time, but the job action was unrelated. Others now fear that their jobs will be jeopardized if I refer them to the EAP. How can I convince them that the termination was totally unrelated?**

Answer: Policies that establish EAPs always include the provision that participation cannot cause an employee's job security or promotional opportunities to be threatened. Both the policy and the organizational culture must make it clear to

employees that getting help is a positive and useful step that top management supports. Undoubtedly, employees see that the vast majority of people who use the EAP remain in their jobs without incident. Still, it is important to remind employees of the EAP policy to allay fears and false associations like the one you describe. Fear about whether an EAP is truly confidential or safe is normal, but it can sabotage a program's utilization if no promotional strategy exists to counter it. Although you cannot discuss confidential information, remind employees that using the EAP is considered a positive thing, not a negative one. When everyone understands your organization's grounds for termination—unacceptable performance despite repeated written and oral warnings—then they will see that the EAP can only help, not hurt.

Question: I have made promises that I have not been able to keep concerning increasing people's pay, changing the work unit and hiring help to share the workload. I haven't kept these promises because I don't have final "say-so." How do I improve my reputation?

Answer: The desire to say anything that will improve morale sometimes leads supervisors to make promises they can't keep. If you lack the authority to fulfill certain promises, don't make them. Failure to follow through undermines your ability to supervise your unit. You lose credibility, and your employees will look elsewhere for leadership. The next time you're tempted to state a promise, stop and ask yourself if you can control variables that may keep you from

delivering on it. Enlist higher-ups to support your goal. confirm that internal systems are in place so that you can do what you say. Check that you have the tools and resources (such as the necessary budget) to deliver on your commitment. When you do decide to issue a promise, treat it seriously. Write it down in your day planner. Set mini-deadlines along the way so that you hold yourself accountable for making steady progress. Keep employees informed so that they appreciate your diligence and determination. Don't get caught with them needing to remind you of your promise.

Question: I disciplined an employee with a three-day suspension and immediately had several employees confront me. They insisted on knowing all the particulars, but I said it was inappropriate to discuss it. They were very angry with me. Did I do the right thing?

Answer: Yes. The information related to the discipline of an employee is not public information. It's a private matter between you and the individual. It is natural for others to be curious—to want to play judge and jury—but that does not mean you must indulge them. Revealing the specifics of a disciplinary action to employees can lower their confidence in your leadership. Staffers know that a supervisor must show discretion and respect each person's privacy. As much as they may clamor to know what happened and why, they surely realize that you would be acting irresponsibly if you shared the details of the suspension. Your best response is "I'm sure you can understand that this is confidential, and I cannot discuss it." If they persist, resist the urge to modify your response. The minute you start revealing little bits of information, employees will demand to know even more.



Question: I tried to make a supervisor referral to the EAP, but my employee refused because she is very religious and believes the EAP will not see the issue as a spiritual, religious matter. How do I get her to visit the EAP? Things cannot remain as they are with her performance.

Answer: Assure her that the EAP treats every issue in an unbiased, comprehensive manner. EAP professionals are trained to be sensitive to wide-ranging beliefs and will act to help your employee feel accepted regardless of her religious or spiritual preferences. They will not attempt to convince her to abandon religious beliefs but will instead view them as important personal assets for her to use in helping resolve personal problems. She thus has nothing to fear by opening up within the safe, supportive EAP environment. Letting her know that the EAP will get her to the resources suitable for her needs will help her accept a referral. No matter what happens, enforce performance standards and act as necessary if those standards remain unmet.

Question: One of my employees asked me the other day if the EAP could help her stop smoking. That's not part of the EAP's role, is it?

Answer: The EAP can give referrals to smoking cessation classes and provide ongoing support to anyone who wants to quit smoking. Talking with an EAP professional can serve as an effective follow up to a cessation class. At the EAP, your employee can discuss why she's determined to quit and can gain strength and willpower by reaffirming her goal and sharing her experience. The EAP can also offer practical pointers on how to combat cravings. Examples include drinking water to ward off the temptation to smoke or following a daily exercise routine to lose weight while remaining smoke free. Research shows that the odds of successful smoking cessation improve when individuals gain encouragement from a supportive team of allies. This team can include family, friends, coworkers and the EAP.

To speak with an EAP professional,
please call: **800.765.0770**

