

SOLUTIONS

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Question: When employees with performance issues mention their personal problems, I feel obligated to participate in these discussions. It may sound cold, but I want to rid myself of this feeling and, like other supervisors, focus only on work issues. How can I achieve this?

Answer: Thinking that you are a cold person for not discussing personal problems with your employees is a clue to the importance of overcoming this challenge. Staying focused on what is relevant to work and avoiding personal issues can be difficult if you are accustomed to others relying upon you to support them and solve their problems. It can be even more challenging if you feel satisfied or rewarded for it. Is your awareness about getting too involved a recent development? Have you recognized this struggle in the past, perhaps with other relationships outside of work? The EAP is a good starting point to help you identify the pattern and work toward ridding yourself of this struggle. Your experience is not uncommon. If important relationships in your past, especially in the home, were associated with guilt for not being a “fixer” or if you had responsibility for solving others’ personal problems or preventing them, you could feel obligated now to get involved with employees’ problems. The EAP can help.

Question: My employee complained about stress and mentioned several physical complaints, such as sometimes having cold sweats, anxiety, and indigestion. The employee looked fine, but I recommended the EAP. Did I do the right thing? What if it was a heart problem and not stress?

Answer: Your referral to the EAP was appropriate. Employees sometimes seek help from employee assistance professionals with issues best addressed by medical professionals. In these cases, the EAP relies on medical resources within the community to help employees. Your employee complained about stress, and you followed the policy about referring the employee to the EAP. Barring an obvious or potential emergency, a referral to another resource based on your determination about what might have been the true ailment would have been outside your role. Health conditions ranging from high blood pressure to rashes to headaches to sleeplessness are often present along with other personal problems in EAP offices. They require proper medical assessment. Sometimes these problems combine with other physical, emotional, or environmental issues that benefit from EAP involvement. Regardless, the EAP will not assume that a physical complaint is simply a symptom of a mental health issue or stress.



Question: Employee negativity appears to be part of this current economic downturn. As a line manager, am I helpless to address it? I can't counsel employees, and I can't simply refer everyone to the EAP. So how do I make an impact?

Answer: Employee negativity can be worsened by the economy, but it is likely that the work environment fuels much of it. This doesn't mean you caused it. Supervisors don't hear it often enough, but employee negativity is sometimes not management's fault. However, everyone has a responsibility to intervene. Decide where your influence rests by considering the following factors, all of which saturate the literature on the subject of morale and negativity. Any of these issues could be the culprit and contribute to workplace negativity: (1) excessive workload; (2) concerns about the manager's ability to lead successfully; (3) anxiety about the future; (4) long-term growth, income, and retirement security uncertainties; (5) lack of challenging work; (6) boredom; (7) insufficient recognition for level of contribution or concerns that pay isn't commensurate with performance; (8) chronic co-worker personality conflicts; (9) perceived disinterest by the manager in the employee's career needs; and/or (10) a lack of opportunity to vent and process workplace stressors, misconceptions, rumors, and misperceptions. As you can see, many of these issues are associated with or may be resolved by effective communication. You may have the ability to influence change in any of these areas, and the EAP can help.

Question: Can it be considered retaliation if I refer my employee to the EAP? What if the employee thinks it would be a "mark" on their reputation?

Answer: Employee Assistance Programs are not punitive or disciplinary programs. They

are programs of attraction and goodwill to help employees resolve personal problems or concerns that may affect job performance. With such a definition underscored by EAP history as well as a definition supported by national and international EAP associations, a properly conducted supervisor referral could not be genuinely viewed as harmful. EAP policies typically include provisions that disallow an employee's career or promotional opportunities to be harmed or jeopardized for using the EAP. Many big-company CEOs, in an effort to add their own emphasis regarding this point, have disclosed their own experiences with EAPs, with some making their resolutions of personal problems public—even recovery from alcoholism—with credit being given to the EAPs for helping them succeed.

Question: Can I refer an employee to the EAP to gain more confidence in skills and abilities? One of my employees has the skills, but lack of confidence and negative self-talk is the problem. I could give the employee motivational improvement literature, but is that getting too involved?

Answer: Coaching employees and helping them boost self-confidence is appropriate for supervisors. Motivational literature can be effective in assisting anyone to aspire to greater things, so there is no harm in providing it. But what if it doesn't work or have much of an impact? Then it may be time to go a bit further and recommend the EAP. Before making a referral, however, talk with the EAP. Your discussion will probably lead to other techniques within the scope of your role that could help your employee overcome the negative pattern. Don't head down the path of having private counseling sessions to explore the nuances of your employee's problems. If your employee doesn't change, and negativity seems chronic and disruptive, consider the idea of a formal supervisor referral to the EAP.

Question: Is a “difficult” employee and a “troubled” employee the same thing? Why do many books discuss the supervisor’s role in managing difficult employees, but omit thorough discussions about the role of an EAP?

Answer: In the EAP view, a difficult employee becomes a troubled employee when a supervisor’s attempts to correct unacceptable behavior aren’t successful. In other words, just because an employee demonstrates difficult behavior does not necessarily mean he or she is troubled with a personal problem that requires professional intervention. Moreover, it doesn’t necessarily mean that the EAP is needed, at least not yet. Instead, most employees with difficult behaviors readily self-correct when the supervisor insists on it. While a difficult employee may have a personality style and behavioral patterns that grate on others, a troubled employee tries to control these behaviors unsuccessfully in an attempt to prevent adverse effects on job performance and security. Ultimately, however, troubled employees fail at willfully making the corrections they want because of underlying personal problems contributing to their dysfunctions.

Question: When I write a corrective letter, I always include the EAP as a resource. Some employees act on these letters, visit the EAP, and correct performance quickly. Others ignore them. How do I help employees take these memos more seriously?

Answer: Employees who respond to your nondisciplinary corrective letters and those who don’t are motivated by different things. Although most employees rapidly see the need to respond to a supervisor’s request for changes or improved performance, other employees need more help to do so. A memorandum will be more effective if it

succeeds in keeping its message uppermost in these employees’ minds. Do this by including a specific day, date, and time for a follow-up meeting. Make it sooner than later. A follow-up date and place capture the imagination better and create a sense of urgency more effectively. To get more leverage with your correspondence, be sure to remind employees about the rewards for success and the negative consequences for not following through. Mentioning the rewards and consequences permits your message to appeal to the motivational factors that employees may experience differently.

Question: I have been asked to be less “aggressive” in my communication. Some think I am overly critical of employees and that I don’t communicate very well. I admit that I am not the touchy-feely type, but why can’t my style of directness be accepted?

Answer: As a supervisor, you must respond to employees in a way that helps them realize their potential for their benefit and that of the employer. There is nothing wrong with being direct; however, does your approach work for your employer? It appears that it may be off-putting. Certainly there are employees who accept a direct and forceful style, but what about others who gain more from a softer approach? Are you willing to make some adjustments? Your communication style is learned. It is likely that you are not aggressive all the time with every person you meet. This indicates that you are capable of “professional use of self.” This is the ability to determine and purposely adapt temporarily to the needs of another person so you can be more effective in the relationship with the person.



Question: How can supervisors refer employees to the EAP earlier to resolve personal problems that interfere with their performance? It seems that many employees get referred too late, when there is less of an opportunity to nip problems in the bud before they become unmanageable. Any tips?

Answer: Start by viewing the EAP as a means of helping employees resolve *performance* issues and not simply *personal* problems. “But an EAP deals with personal problems!” many supervisors might say. Yes, it does, but that did not fuel EAP programs’ rapid emergence within the workplace in the 1970s. The supervisor referral mechanism to help employees with persistent performance problems is what spurred their popularity. Resolving personal problems follows. You will help more employees, reduce turnover, and discover that more employees enter treatment for problems you never suspected by viewing EAPs as a helpful management tool. This historical rationale continues to make EAPs unique and effective, but it is often omitted or overlooked in contemporary workforce management literature. It is the crucial element of what makes EAPs unique and successful.

Question: My employee has wide mood swings ranging from acting happy and energetic to being quiet and sad. Is this bipolar disorder? I am not sure how to document it.

Answer: You should request a consultation with an EAP professional to zero in on behaviors and issues which can be measured, articulated, and documented. Documenting behavior can be difficult because the negative impact on the work situation may not be readily apparent, despite its significance. When supervisors witness behavioral issues that appear overtly psychiatric, the natural response is to search for and understand the mental health diagnosis. Instead, focus on inappropriate behavior and its effect on the work situation, and have the EAP professional guide you in producing effective documentation.

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

