

Frontline Supervisor



■ **Referring an employee to the EAP because of severe conduct problems is straightforward. My concern is how I approach an employee who appears disturbed or agitated on the job.**

Many supervisors share your concern, but planning the steps you would take in a situation where an employee appears upset or agitated can help you feel better prepared if it happens. Your organization does not want you to place yourself at risk, so consider if you need help from another manager, or even the police in an unusual situation. Some troubled employees may exhibit unusual behaviors that are not threatening, such as talking strangely, appearing confused or disoriented, or crying. Enlisting another manager to help you approach an employee can be helpful. This reduces defensiveness, and you gain the benefit of having a reliable witness in case one is needed later. Guiding the employee to a private office or work space away from others or an unsafe environment is a good first step. Gently encourage the employee to accompany you and your colleague; don't grab the person's hand or otherwise risk antagonizing him or her. Know your organization's fitness-for-duty policy; don't read it only after a crisis ensues!

■ **I think supervisors are sometimes too worried about getting involved with the personal problems of employees. As a result, they appear impersonal and employees recognize it. This compounds problems because employees think the supervisor does not care about them. Am I right?**

There is a difference between getting involved in an employee's personal problems and being supportive. A supervisor does not have to behave in a detached and aloof manner to keep from getting involved with the employee's issues. The challenge comes when a personal problem appears simple or understandable to the supervisor. It is then tempting to offer advice, despite unknown dimensions to the problem that might exist. The other part of this challenge comes from employees who *want* the supervisor involved in their problems. These employees desire a different type of relationship with their supervisor—one that meets their personal needs. Supervisors should resist, as it is important for them to understand that meeting personal needs and going beyond their normal role will almost always interfere with managing productivity later.

■ **My employee was referred to the EAP because of chronic tardiness. A few days later, he came to work with a**

Discuss this note with your manager or human resources advisor. It is important to determine, or inquire, whether this is a note from the doctor explaining his unpredictable lateness to work, or if it represents a request to accommodate his illness by permitting unpredictable lateness to work. You may decide that it is not possible to accommodate unpredictable

doctor's note saying that he will be unpredictably late to work because of his medical condition. A release is signed, but the EAP is not aware of the note. Now what?

lateness because it is an essential function of his position to be on time. In this case, the EAP will need to work with him further, if possible. If you ultimately decide that it is permissible for him to come unpredictably late to work (unusual but possible), then the EAP's work may be done. This situation represents a good example of why it can be important to consult with management resources so you can respond properly to medical issues interfering with attendance and performance.

■ My employee does not like her job, but she is good at it. I don't have another position for her, and she doesn't want to quit. Her morale is not very good. Sometimes her attitude is poor. Is there a way to help her feel more joy in her position?

There are several things that you can do that might help your employee. Try helping her set goals during the coming year so she can look forward to some meaningful accomplishments. Find ways of rewarding her for steps along the way. Come up with different things that she can do voluntarily on her breaks, if she likes, that will allow her to gain new skills and abilities. Think in terms of giving her more responsibility in the office, not necessarily more work. More responsibility is a powerful reward for employees, sometimes better than a raise because it influences how people feel about themselves. Don't rule out a referral to the EAP if her attitude gets worse, and you may wish to suggest self-referral now. There could be a personal issue contributing to her attitude problems.

■ I want to be a good role model to my employees. What are some ways of doing this that will help them be better employees and also make them more valuable to the organization?

Be a role model to your employees in the following ways, which are typically overlooked by many supervisors, and you will be applauded at the top of your organization: 1) Demonstrate that you have an understanding of the economics of your industry and the key issues of concern faced by your organization in the marketplace. 2) Make decisions consistent with these issues. 3) Follow the organization's policies, never accept mediocrity, and be creative. 4) Don't let your ego get in the way of being open-minded, ask for help, and seek advice from others who have a different perspective on problems. 5) Don't be afraid to surround yourself with people smarter than you, and show that you focus on overcoming obstacles to success, not whining about them.

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