



Supervisor Questions & Answers

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www.eapnetwork.com

■ **What is a key reason some supervisors don't refer employees to the EAP, despite being trained to do so? Referring to the EAP is a straightforward process. I can't believe it's because supervisors forget, don't see the need, or don't believe in the program.**

One common but seldom-discussed reason supervisors neglect to use the EAP Network is their emotional reaction to troubled employees and a reluctance to make a referral. Consider the emotional reaction a supervisor might have to multiple instances of unauthorized leave, excessive sick leave, long coffee breaks, difficulty in recalling mistakes, blaming the supervisor for the mistakes, complaints from customers, and wild mood swings. Very commonly, the feeling is anger. However, this reaction can interfere with the supervisor's decision to make a formal supervisory referral. This frustration and resulting anger might be a "successful" way for the supervisor to feel vented and self-satisfied but without a resolution to the problem. So, the problems return or later crises result in a dismissal of the difficult employee.

Another reaction may be a supervisor who is overly sympathetic and concerned about how to make the referral because it will hurt the employee's feelings. A referral to an EAP professional can not only help the employee, but the manager as well. The EAP can provide specific resources that may resolve the employee's personal issues. The supervisor will get encouragement and support from the EAP and information about how to prepare for the meeting with the employee and make an effective referral.

■ **Why are symptoms of alcoholism and drug addiction so different among employees? The most dramatic variance I have seen in my career is the issue of tardiness and absenteeism—some had a lot, others had none.**

The behavioral signs and symptoms of alcoholism or drug addiction usually appear where they are least likely to create undesired consequences for the alcoholic or drug user, at least in the early stages of the illness. This is a time when the addict can exert more control. As the illness grows worse, this control lessens and more unpredictable behavioral patterns result. In a job where failure to come to work on time could lead to immediate dismissal, on-time attendance is more likely. However, driving under the influence or domestic problems may be common. If a manager appears to be lenient with regard to attendance and on-time appearance, then attendance issues are likely to be more prevalent. Indeed, most employees pay close attention to the degree to which on-time arrival to work is required, and what consequences ensue for failing to show or coming in late. Note that many personal problems impact attendance. You will, therefore, see a great degree of variance among employees with regard to this performance standard.

■ **Must everything we do as supervisors fall under the**

It may not seem fair, but your employees are continuously judging you by your behaviors. By virtue of your position, every behavior you exhibit

heading of “being a role model?” Personally, I think it is good to loosen up every once in a while so that employees see we are real people who can have a good time.

to employees is viewed in the context of you as a role model. This is an inescapable dynamic of workplace authority and supervision. But there is more to it. All behaviors of supervisors make an impression on employees because their behaviors are symbolic. They tell your employees what you value, what you support, and what you stand for. This is a powerful tool in leadership. Not understanding this dynamic can cause you to lose their respect, along with harming your ability to influence and shape a team. Unfortunately, this easily happens when supervisors feel uncomfortable with this power or believe that being “one of the guys (or gals)” is more important.

■ I sometimes wonder about employees’ personality problems when they exhibit difficult behavior. For example, I think one of my employees is a narcissist. Isn’t it a good idea for the EAP to offer advice on how to communicate with different types of personalities?

Longstanding EAP guidance on avoiding diagnostic thinking on the part of supervisors has wide-ranging importance in the management of performance. A key issue is reducing the lag time for referring an employee to the EAP. Anything that impedes this process increases risk to the organization. Engaging with difficult personalities with the goal of overcoming their personality traits or “out-psyching” them contributes to this delay. Many people have elements of their personality that fall within descriptions of personality disorders. There is no “science” involving the mastery of engaging with personality disorders. A better way to go is to consult with the EAP about individual employees and your concerns about their work, behavior, attitude, or attendance. Then follow an effective approach for helping them become the best workers they can be. That might include help from the EAP.

■ I am unsure how to respond to some problems raised by employees to explain their performance issues. For example, I have an employee with a tardiness problem who blames the traffic. I spend precious time advising on these issues, but to no avail. EAP referral doesn’t make sense.

It is easy to get bogged down in helping employees troubleshoot problems like traffic or babysitting quandaries in an effort to have them perform, or in this case, arrive on time. This is all natural and quite expected in close working relationships. However, such discussions can grow wider and deeper. Eventually, you may not consider the EAP as an option. Here’s where it gets interesting: If you have spent a large amount of time troubleshooting a problem like traffic, you may not realize that other problems may contribute to the tardiness. These other problems may actually be the primary cause. Still, you may believe the EAP can’t help because, after all, this is about traffic. Any EAP could cite dozens of primary contributing factors to tardiness of which supervisors were completely unaware.

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