

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

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Frontline Supervisor



Information for Managers, Team Leaders, and Supervisors

■ **My employee is recuperating at home after an on-the-job injury, and I hear that he is drinking heavily. I've always been under the impression that this employee doesn't drink. I'm worried about the effect it could have on his returning to work? Can I make a referral to the EAP?**

Rumors about your employee's behavior at home aren't enough to substantiate a supervisor referral to the EAP because they do not pertain to performance or behavior on the job. If your employee phones to discuss work-related issues, ask how he or she is feeling and recovering from the injury. Expressions of support facilitate injured employees returning to work sooner, so let the employee know you look forward to his or her return. If you hear expressions of frustration with being absent from work, encourage self-referral to the EAP for support. It might lead to an assessment. On the other hand, it's likely that the drinking pattern will continue upon return to work, especially if this is the relapse of a recovering person. If so, you may notice a pattern of performance decline that didn't exist prior to the injury. Injury and illness are known relapse triggers for recovering persons. Focus on performance and consult with the EAP on how to proceed. If the employee is in a safety sensitive position, consult with HR.

■ **An employee appearing drunk at work was tested in accordance with our policy and scored above the legal limit for driving. His supervisor then announced to a group of people in the hallway that the employee was drunk and needed to go home. Is this proper?**

Although the employee appeared drunk to those nearby, a manager's declaration that an employee is drunk and needs to go home is improper. It discloses the results of a positive test, and violates confidentiality and privacy provisions associated with drug testing procedures. Although an employee who tests positive at work should not be at work, an anxious and curious group of coworkers in a hallway should be met with a statement of assurance such as "The matter at hand is being managed properly in accordance with the organization's policy." Nothing more need be said. Managers' actions and words model how matters of this type are handled. The supervisor's behavior in this case is neither likely to send a message that dignifies the medical condition of a potentially alcoholic employee, nor reduce stigma associated with addictive disease.

■ **Supervisors are not supposed to make conclusions or analyze their employees' personal problems when performance issues exist. Isn't this impossible,**

To wonder what is causing the decline in an employee's performance is natural. It's what happens next that can interfere with an employee improving his or her performance or getting help for a personal problem, if one exists. Frequently supervisors test their theories or beliefs concerning the nature of an employee's problem by making simple inquiries. For example, "How are things going at home, Ralph—not so good, perhaps?" An inquiry of this nature puts the employee squarely in control

and doesn't it go against human nature? I always have an idea about what's contributing to an employee's performance problems.

of the dialog with the supervisor, the outcome of the discussion, and usually whether an EAP referral will follow. In matters concerning performance issues, the employee—along with his supervisor, family members, and coworkers—may be *unaware* of a personal problem. Sometimes, only through a professional assessment is the ultimate source of performance problems discovered.

■ My employee doesn't trust anyone, and in my view, probably won't open up with the EAP. How do EAPs work with employees like this? I am sure the belief that some employees won't "open up" with the EAP plays a role in some supervisors' reluctance to refer them.

Do not presume that an employee you know well, who appears to be closed and unwilling to warm up to others, won't be just the opposite with the EAP. An EAP interview may be the only place where your employee feels safe enough to disclose his or her personal story. Employee assistance professionals are specially trained and experienced at establishing trust with their clients. They know how to listen and ask the right questions in the right order without making judgments. Employee assistance professionals are able to put clients at ease and determine how slowly or quickly an employee will begin to share personal information. They also know where to start asking questions in order to help an employee feel safe and open up. Even more important, they know when certain questions should wait until the next meeting.

■ I had an employee get angry with me and say, "Someday man, I'm going to take you out." I confronted the employee to get an explanation about what "out" meant. Nothing more was said. I was nervous, but should I have done more? Is an EAP referral appropriate?

It's clear that you interpreted this expression as a threat to commit a violent act and reacted to it that way. This outweighs seeking clarification and deliberating over semantics to determine what was actually meant. Organizations and their policies have different ways of responding to these types of statements. Know how your organization wants you to respond, in addition to taking steps to protect yourself when you feel threatened. Err on the side of caution, immediately document an incident, discuss the matter with your advisors, and make a supervisor referral to the EAP. Any threat should be taken seriously.

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