

# FrontLine Supervisor

UT Employee Assistance Program • (800) 346-3549

**■ Is it unfair to consider my employee lazy rather than a troubled worker when this sort of behavior seems long term—almost part of his or her personality? Should I believe instead that there is always an explanation for what appears to be laziness, and just refer the employee to the EAP?**

**Laziness is associated** with behaviors that can be measured. Focus on those, not the label. Consider a few supervisory interventions before making your referral. 1) Ask your employee why he or she is disinclined to work, participate in work activities with more vigor, or exert him- or herself to get the job done. 2) Have a discussion with your employee about his or her job description. Does he or she really know what it is? Delve deeper and ask your employee what he or she thinks the job entails. Answers to these questions will tell you a great deal about this problem. 3) Decide on what constitutes satisfactory performance and give your employee a project. Over a period of weeks, watch for quantifiable issues that demonstrate problematic behaviors. 4) Discover through conversation what motivates your employee, and use these things as rewards for the completion of work assignments. 5) Examine the work environment, too, but be cautious with this one. Accepting the employee's analysis that the organization is to blame is a dead end in helping the employee. Refer the employee to the EAP if changes are not forthcoming.

**■ Why should supervisors consult with the EAP early in the process of managing troubled employees? Sometimes I work with an employee for months or perhaps a year before deciding to involve the EAP.**

**The rationale for** consulting with EAPs early is one of risk reduction as much as it is helping the employee. You are only human, and over the course of months or even years of engaging with a potentially manipulative worker, you are at risk for saying and doing things that may not be in the best interest of yourself or the organization. These behaviors could prompt employment or legal claims stemming from your emotional reactions, exchanges, or mismanaged responses to the employee's problems. Engaging with the EAP helps you avoid emotional hooks early because you feel the EAP's support. This way you keep a cooler head and make more levelheaded decisions. EAPs have a lot of experience, and as they hear stories about troubled employees, they can often make early guesses about the nature of problems. Consulting with the EAP therefore results in earlier referral, saving you time and hassle that could last years.

**■ My boss thinks I mismanaged an employee whom I referred to the EAP. The**

**The EAP won't be** able to play this advocacy role in communicating with management about the nature of the case and your role as a manager in dealing with the employee. The EAP can meet with you, however, to

**referral didn't work out and the employee was let go. Can the EAP write a letter on my behalf stating that I managed the referral correctly? Releases are signed. I think I am being treated unfairly.**

discuss the scope of the problem and suggest ways in which you may be able to respond. These sorts of conflicts often have multiple levels of concern associated with them. Indeed, unless management shared the full scope of their concerns, the EAP would not be able to prepare a suitable response and would be at a disadvantage in attempting to do so. Ultimately, the credibility of the EAP would suffer from a perception it was taking sides in a management dispute. In the end, employees who depend on the EAP would suffer.

**What if I refer an employee to the EAP and they don't think they need it? Isn't it important for the employee being referred to someone who believe they need help so it is not a waste of the EAP's time?**

**The EAP would not** consider it a waste of time to meet with an employee who at first appears unmotivated, in denial, or otherwise convinced they do not need help. The important issue is whether the employee came of their own volition. Regarding motivation, desire, and insight—these often arrive later by way of an assessment and use of interviewing techniques called motivational counseling. It is quite normal for troubled employees to walk into an EAP office with one or more of three common viewpoints: 1) It's my supervisor's fault—I am not the one with the problem; 2) I am only here because I was told I had to come; and 3) I have no idea why I am here. All three of these are standard fare for EAPs, and EA professionals know how to address each one.

**I give feedback to my employees—each one—several times a year, but I do not do the “walking around to catch people doing things right” approach I see in management reading material. How much feedback and how often is recommended by experts?**

**The question of** giving praise and feedback, including negative feedback to employees, is not so much about frequency and numbers, but how this communication helps produce a work climate that develops your staff and helps them achieve their work objectives. Many supervisors fail to understand the personal power they possess to influence their employees' morale, motivation, desire to perform, innovation, desire to put in the hours, or their ability to feel good about themselves and the company itself. Supervisors are in control of all these things by way of a dynamic called “delegated authority.” A supervisor's ability to influence these attitudes and behaviors is not earned like respect. It is instantaneous with the title, unless it is undermined in some way. The ideal balance regarding feedback exists when no employees are questioning where they stand with you and what you think about their performance.

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## NOTES