



April 2014

FrontLine Supervisor

UT Employee Assistance Program • (800) 346-3549

■ **What can I promise employees with regard to confidentiality and the EAP when they ask about it? I know that confidentiality has limitations with regard to protecting children or the elderly or preventing loss of life, but I don't think I should get bogged down in those issues.**

■ **What supervisory duty is the most difficult one to grasp for new supervisors? How can EAPs help new supervisors?**

■ **My employee was coming to work late every day. I finally decided to transfer her to the three to eleven o'clock shift. Everybody's happy with that. The problem is solved. I'm aware of a rumor about a**

When employees ask about confidentiality, they are usually seeking assurance that they are protected against repercussions, improper disclosure, and harm to their job status as a result of using the program. EAP policies typically describe confidentiality parameters, so reinforce what's already in writing. EAPs require informed consent regarding the scope of confidentiality, so let your employees know the EAP can answer any questions at the time of an appointment or beforehand by phone. Reinforce the strict confidential nature of the EAP whenever you refer to it in the course of your activities and role as a supervisor. Doing so will help keep EAP utilization high and alleviate concerns, make it more likely at-risk employees will seek help, and thereby reduce risk to the organization.

Supervision is about directing others to do things and being accountable to a higher authority for how well it's done. In line with this description, new supervisors often struggle with delegation, and much supervision literature is dominated by this topic. Delegation is more than directing others, stepping back, and returning to hold them accountable. Many subtasks and skills accompany it. These include self-awareness, communication, conflict management, time management, understanding motivation, coaching, maintaining morale, problem solving, recordkeeping, and more. EAPs are problem solvers, and they can help new supervisors overcome obstacles that interfere with their ability to perform these many tasks. Some are easy to spot, like a need to give more feedback to an employee, while others are more difficult to see or accept, such as issues with trust that a supervisor may struggle to overcome.

Your job as a supervisor is to support your organization's mission and properly manage employees under your supervision toward that end. You had different options for solving this problem, and you chose one that worked. You did your job and can't be criticized for it. Yes, you could have referred your employee to the EAP for being late to work and kept her on the same shift, and that may have led to her treatment and recovery and an end to tardiness. Unsubstantiated concerns about a drinking problem would not be a basis for your referral, however. You

possible drinking problem, so did I use the wrong approach by not making a formal referral to the EAP?

can only focus on performance. If lateness was due to a drinking problem, this problem may eventually return after a period of exerted self-control. This is not unusual for employees with alcohol problems as they move between jobs or work shifts or seek other life changes in an attempt to gain control over drinking.

■ When performance issues stem from personal problems at home, it may be appropriate to demonstrate patience while the employee seeks help. Unfortunately, many employees seem to have chronic problems. How can supervisors influence employees to resolve their personal problems permanently?

Follow-up is the key to helping employees remain successful after referral to the EAP. Don't underestimate how long this should continue. Follow-up means regularly meeting with an employee to discuss performance, reinforcing progress, and troubleshooting obstacles. It also means getting regular feedback from the EAP (with a signed release) so that continued participation and cooperation with EAP recommendations can be confirmed. Open communication that involves this harmony of cooperation between employee, EAP, and supervisor is crucial. In its absence, the risk of problems continuing is high. Take the advice of the EAP on the length of time recommended for follow-up, or ask about it. Some personal problems are easier to treat and manage than others. Those that require more personal sacrifice and lifestyle changes tend to have the highest relapse rates, making follow-up critical to successful resolution of performance problems.

■ Why do supervisors avoid confronting employees about their performance issues?

The most common reason for avoiding confrontation is fear. Overcoming this fear is accomplished by understanding how to use an effective approach. Being firm and direct and not sugarcoating the message is important, but this can be accomplished in a way that eliminates heavy-handedness and engenders cooperation. For example, "Bill, I received feedback about your customer presentation yesterday, and I want to share it with you." "Bill, some customers felt your presentation lacked depth in its details, leaving them feeling more confused. Were you aware of these concerns?" "Bill, I want to work with you to improve your marketing presentation; how would you suggest we go about making such improvements?" Notice in these examples how the supervisor elicits a "partnering" approach to solving problems. The concerns of the supervisor are concrete and the approach is likely to elicit better cooperation in solving the performance issues, as opposed to harming the relationship by making the employee feel scolded.

NOTES