

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource--Employees

April 2005

Q. What can supervisors do to help ensure that corrective interviews with employees will not become emotional, confrontational, and ineffective?

A. Although nothing guarantees a corrective interview without problems, there are things you can do to make problems less likely. Always demonstrate respect for your employee with language and tone, and choose an appropriate meeting place. Focus your discussion on the performance issues, not the personality or character of your employee. Check your emotions to prevent using language designed to elicit guilt or shame that can provoke contentious behavior. Help your employee see correcting his or her performance as a goal you share together. Example: "Susan, how can we work together to get your weekly auditing reports to me on time?" Approaching your employee in this manner keeps the focus on performance, but does not preclude a more firm and assertive intervention later, if needed.

Q. I overheard a conversation between a couple of employees, and one of them called me a "toxic boss." I think I can guess what they are talking about, but how can I change my basic personality? I try to be patient, but frankly it doesn't last.

A. The term "toxic boss" is not a diagnosis of any condition, but refers to a supervisor who exhibits certain behaviors that cause employees distress. These behaviors include berating your employees, creating division among your employees, appearing to be concerned only about getting the job done, and overlooking

important needs employees have to feel supported and treated with respect. Some supervisors generate fear among employees with their supervision style, or they act like they care about getting input from employees, but never or seldom incorporate it. Does this sound familiar to your supervision style? The EAP can help you examine your supervisory practices and relationship with employees to improve your ability to be more productive while reducing the conflicts between you and your employees. In the end, both you and your organization will benefit from improved morale, reduced turnover, and many costs associated with being a toxic boss.

Q. I found a group of employees drinking non-alcoholic beer at work. Is this something I should be concerned about? One of the employees was an EAP referral, and I know he was treated for alcoholism a year or so ago.

A. Refer to your organization's policy or talk to your human resources advisor about this issue. Non-alcoholic beer generally does contain a small amount of alcohol, although not enough to be considered a controlled beverage. The issue is perception by customers and coworkers, and of course, the smell of beer on one's breath. These issues may be ones the organization wants to address. Although not strictly a performance issue, your recently treated employee would be viewed by treatment professionals as non-compliant with a recovery program. Drinking non-alcoholic beer is generally contraindicated by treatment professionals because of the alcohol content and the risk for precipitation of relapse. Consult with the EAP as necessary, but do not address the management of this treatment issue.

Q My employee is late to work almost every day. He is a hard worker, but he said he is having trouble balancing his work and family life. We have a work/life program in the company. Shouldn't I refer him there instead of the EAP?

A. If offered by your company, encouraging use of the work/life program may be helpful, but it should not be an alternative or a substitute for a supervisor referral to the EAP for the attendance problem. Only a supervisor referral to the EAP is appropriate as an intervention for the attendance issue. From there, the EAP may suggest that the employee participate in the organization's work/ life program. It is possible that something beyond work/life balance issues contributes to your employee's tardiness. Your employee may or may not be aware of these problems, their impact, or their cause. And it is likely that other problems would not be shared with you. It is therefore not good practice to accept on face value an employee's personal explanation for performance problems by suggesting a source of help. Instead, let the EAP take this responsibility after completing an assessment. This will help ensure that the employee is referred to the best avenues of help.

Q. I understand that if my employee does not sign a release of information at an EAP appointment following a supervisor referral, it won't interfere with my ability to supervise him or her. If so, why be concerned about whether the employee signs a release at all?

A. Contrary to frequent misconception, signing a release is primarily a service and a benefit for the employee, not the supervisor, although everyone benefits from good communication when a release exists. Without a release the employee's responsibilities to the work organization do not change, and the supervisor is not at a disadvantage. Obtaining a release originated in EAP programming initially as a way to verify attendance and cooperation with

EAP recommendations when a disciplinary action was held in abeyance. The ability to verify cooperation and follow-through with EAP recommendations meant no adverse action would be taken. The benefit was then extended to any supervisor referral, but the inability to acquire a release is never considered a factor that will interfere with supervising a troubled employee.

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