

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

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

March 2006

Q. *We have several marketing teams, and conflict within one team led me to ask the EAP to provide team-building sessions. There's been some teasing by members of the other three teams—comments such as “psycho-team,” etc. The team needing help is now reluctant to participate. What should I do?*

A. If any of the team members who participated in the EAP team-building sessions improve their performance and emerge as high-achieving stars, then the name-calling should subside. Consider this strategy: Refer one of the other teams to the EAP—especially the one with the most vocal teasers. Explain that the EAP helps everyone acquire tools and skills, and that it's only fair that you give another group a chance to experience this benefit. The teasers' attitude will change as they discover firsthand what the EAP has to offer. Encouraging members of different groups to work together breaks down barriers among them and forces them to collaborate respectfully. So reward teams based on cooperation, not competition. Also, measure everyone's performance using objective, quantifiable outcomes. Tabulate and distribute the results on a regular basis so that everyone can track each other's progress.

Q. *We terminated an employee for poor performance. He was participating in the EAP at the time, but the job action was unrelated. Others now fear that their jobs will be jeopardized if I refer them to the EAP. How can I convince them that the termination was totally unrelated?*

A. Policies that establish EAPs always include the provision that participation cannot cause an employee's job security or promotional opportunities to be threatened. Both the policy and the organizational culture must make it clear to employees that getting help is a positive and useful step that top management supports. Undoubtedly, employees see that the vast majority of people who use the EAP remain in their jobs without incident. Still, it is important to remind employees of the EAP policy to allay fears and false associations like the one you describe. Fear about whether an EAP is truly confidential or safe is normal, but it can sabotage a program's utilization if no promotional strategy exists to counter it. Although you cannot discuss confidential information, remind employees that using the EAP is considered a positive thing, not a negative one. When everyone understands your organization's grounds for termination—unacceptable performance despite repeated written and oral warnings—then they will see that the EAP can only help, not hurt.

Q. *My employee returned after a supervisor referral and stated, “Yeah, I went to the EAP, and now they know the whole story, not just yours.” The EAP reports directly to top management, and I am a bit concerned about whether the EAP heard a bunch of distortions and what they may think.*

A. It is not unusual for employees to visit the EAP and vent their frustrations about supervisors in a confidential setting. Do not be

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concerned. This is a positive step that will facilitate a helping relationship between the EAP and the employee. EA professionals regularly anticipate that employees will impart their side of the story, but the focus of the EAP interview will be on correcting performance issues, identifying personal problems, and making recommendations about areas over which the employee has control. Reports of your personality issues and supervision practices are not the focus of change in an EAP interview with your employee. Sharing as much information about the job performance issues of your employee with the EAP prior to a supervisor referral will assist the EA professional in putting such reports in perspective. The EAP can then prompt employees to examine their feelings and take steps toward change.

Q. One of my employees has benefited greatly from the EAP. If she gives me permission to cite her as an example of how it can help, can I direct other workers to her who want to learn more about the EAP?

A. Regardless of whether or not she gives permission, it's a bad idea to refer other workers to her to discuss the EAP. This creates a dangerous precedent; employees should never be placed in a position of providing testimony about their EAP experiences. For starters, this would reduce the anonymity that EAP clients often need. It might also taint others' perceptions of how the EAP works. Moreover, your employee may be subtly pressured by peers to reveal sensitive information that she may later regret divulging. If employees want to learn more about the EAP, direct them to promotional venues such as brochures or to a Web site. A positive personal experience with the EAP, if you feel comfortable sharing it, would also be helpful.

Q. I am not sure that I am cut out to supervise people. I hesitate to confront my employees, and I dread meeting with them in a group. Sometimes I delegate supervision to others, and I avoid meeting with complainers. Should I look for another job or use the EAP to help me?

A. Before you conclude that you're not equipped to manage people, discuss your concerns with an EA professional. Each of the issues you've mentioned is a common challenge that supervisors face. Many supervisors dislike confrontation and take pains to avoid it. You may never learn to enjoy it, but you can develop strategies to communicate clearly and diplomatically in potentially adversarial situations. Dreading team meetings may stem from shyness, discomfort with group dynamics, or other factors. The EAP can help you develop strategies to assert yourself in groups and become more comfortable leading discussions and giving presentations. Delegation is actually a learned skill. Effective supervisors usually learn that in order to gain power, they have to give some of it up. So the fact that you allow others to step into your role may actually work to your advantage, as long as you remain accountable for the results.



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