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UTEAP

FrontLine Supervisor

UT Employee Assistance Program • (800) 346-3549

■ My employee constantly complains about being overloaded, but others with the same workload aren't struggling. How do I tell whether this is a real problem or an attitude issue?

As a rule, take complaints seriously from employees, then examine them objectively. Compare the employee's workload with peers — not just the number of assignments, but task type, turnaround times, error rates, and work product quality. If the numbers align and coworkers are managing, the problem may be less about workload and more about attitude, skill gaps, work habits, or personal stressors. Next, meet with the employee, share what you found, and ask for a response. They may offer context that reframes the complaint or reveals something personal affecting performance. Some employees carry hidden burdens — stress, unclear expectations, or feeling undervalued — that surface as workload complaints. If you determine no work modifications are needed, and later performance remains below standard, address it directly, make an EAP referral, and request a release so you can speak with the EAP. The EAP will conduct a complete assessment. You can count on the EAP to communicate with you about any needed workplace/job accommodations, but barring that, anticipate satisfactory performance.

■ One of my employees has become visibly frustrated and dismissive lately. I find it disrespectful, and it's starting to affect how I interact with her. How do I handle this professionally?

Most supervisors find it difficult to remain objective when they feel disrespected because dismissive behavior feels like a personal attack on their authority. However, correcting and helping employees with attitude problems requires a strategic approach. As a first step, hold a calm, private conversation focused on observable behavior. Ask what the behaviors mean — for example, a raised voice, interrupting, eyerolling, dismissive body language, failure to acknowledge directives, sarcastic or hostile responses, refusal to engage in routine communication, or making disrespectful comments in front of coworkers. These are behaviors you can observe and document. Key: Discuss her behaviors not her attitude. An "attitude" is nearly impossible to quantify, but behaviors can give you more information about what is troubling this worker. Frustration rarely appears without cause, and a conversation focused on observable behavior often reveals something addressable. You may see a "honeymoon effect" immediately after meeting with her, but if problem behaviors continue, refer to the EAP.

■ I've referred many employees to the EAP over the years, but lately I've been feeling burned out, disengaged, and low on energy.

You are demonstrating good self-awareness recognizing the resistance without fully identifying its source. Supervisors have a unique role in organizations, and some of your resistance is linked to dynamics of your position. For example, supervisors often unconsciously adopt the identity of helper and protector rather than someone who needs help. Calling the EAP

I know supervisors can use the EAP, and I don't fear counseling, but what's keeping me from making the call?

means stepping outside that role. That's a little uncomfortable. Second, there's often a subtle belief that your problems aren't "serious enough" to warrant professional attention or that you need to show strength to your subordinates, and visiting the EAP may cause you to feel less strong. Third, making the call means acknowledging something is wrong, and that acknowledgment, however private, can feel like a loss of control. Recognize these barriers for what they are: normal human resistance to change, not reasons to wait. The EAP is confidential, judgment-free, and designed for what's affecting you.

■ **I have an employee whose performance has slipped, but I am hesitant to refer her to the EAP. She seems emotionally fragile. She's mentioned past trauma and gets tearful easily. My fear is of her reaction, whether she'll treat it as a crisis or have an overly acute emotional response.**

The instinct to protect a vulnerable employee is genuinely compassionate, but this is one of the most potentially costly missteps a supervisor can take. You're hoping she doesn't have worsening problems, but waiting is much more likely to contribute to a longer, deeper slide into unhealth. Your hesitation is in effect a clinical judgment you aren't qualified to make. Think about this for a moment. Deciding that an employee is "too fragile" for the EAP assumes that she won't go, or the shock of the referral will cause a mental health crisis. The EAP exists precisely for employees carrying heavy emotional burdens. Counselors are trained to meet people exactly where they are, including those with trauma histories, emotional sensitivity, and internal crises. Continued inaction — however well-intentioned — leaves a struggling employee without professional support while performance problems quietly compound. Do this: Contact the EAP yourself first, describe your concerns, and let them guide your approach.

■ **Some employees are resistant to being referred to the EAP because they believe it is a precursor to getting fired, a first step a supervisor feels they must take, but often too late after they've decided to rid themselves of the worker. How do I intervene if they have this perception?**

The best way to address this perception is head-on. Say directly, "An EAP referral is not a step toward termination — it's the opposite. It means I want to keep you and I'm committed to offering every available resource to help you succeed." Admittedly, the misconception has some basis in reality. Some supervisors have misused the EAP by making referrals only after deciding to terminate — using it to check a box rather than to genuinely help the employee early on. This late-stage cover-your-bases approach undermines the program's credibility and fuels employee suspicion. And that perception then spreads by word of mouth. Consider the loss of productivity and potential effect this can have on an organization. The antidote is a workplace culture where the EAP is consistently presented as a genuine support resource. Be an EAP advocate among your peers. Talk openly about how to use it effectively and early, and you'll make serious headway restoring and enhancing the program's credibility.

NOTES

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