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Supervisor Newsletter

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What is the difference between using the EAP as an alternative to discipline versus as a substitute for discipline?

Using the EAP as an alternative to discipline means the supervisor has a legitimate basis for disciplinary action but offers the employee an opportunity to use the EAP instead, consistent with organizational policy. The employee understands that continued performance problems may result in disciplinary action. This approach preserves accountability while offering help. Using the EAP as a substitute for discipline is different. It means making an EAP referral simply because the supervisor is reluctant to take warranted disciplinary action. This can confuse the employee about the EAP's purpose and turn a helping resource into what appears to be a disciplinary tool. It may also weaken the employee's motivation to address the performance problem. The key distinction is that an EAP referral does not remove the supervisor's responsibility to manage performance. When appropriate, the EAP offers the employee an opportunity to address personal problems that may be contributing to performance difficulties, while the supervisor remains focused on acceptable job performance.

An employee reported that a coworker is using a company vehicle and company time to travel out of state to gamble on horse races. I was already investigating the coworker's unexplained absences but was unaware of this activity. How should I handle the new information?

Treat the coworker's report as information requiring appropriate follow-up, not as established fact. This should be in consultation with appropriate management or your human resources representative. Continue documenting the absences and other performance or conduct issues you can independently verify. Avoid confronting the employee with the allegation until your human resources advisor and manager decide on an approach. The reported misuse of company time and a company vehicle raises separate policy and risk concerns. Avoid focusing on whether the employee has a gambling problem; diagnosing and confronting this problem is not your role. Simply stay focused on workplace conduct and violations that can be established. During the investigation, your employee may step forward to confirm misconduct and a gambling problem. If so, follow your organization's procedures and consider an EAP referral. Also protect the reporting employee's confidentiality to the extent possible. Discourage workplace discussion—likely to occur when investigations and severe problems like this emerge at work—of your employee's issues or circumstances.

I referred two employees to the EAP because of ongoing

Some common missteps in managing two warring employees include trying to get them to make up and become friends, treating their conflict as

conflict. I realize that my missteps in managing these workers may have allowed their relationship to worsen. What are the most common mistakes supervisors make when dealing with employees who can't get along?

if it were a playground squabble. Adult workplace conflicts are usually not amenable to quick reconciliation attempts or superficial approaches aimed at getting employees to like each other. Another misstep is becoming a "couples counselor," thinking that if only the real issue can be uncovered or a determination can be made about who is at fault, the conflict will disappear. Supervisors who play this role can drift into counseling dynamics that include analyzing personalities or repeatedly helping employees process each other's feelings. Another misstep is taking sides because one employee is more persuasive or likable. Finally, avoid viewing the EAP as a "fixer" that will end the conflict for good. The bottom line: What motivates employees most to resolve conflicts are the supervisor's unwavering, believable resolve to no longer tolerate them and clear management expectations that they must end.

■ **One of my employees has been verbally abused by a customer, and she is pretty shaken up. I think she'll get over it. It happens to all of us periodically, but what are some tips for responding and deciding whether to encourage her to contact the EAP?**

After an abusive incident, be sure not to minimize or generalize the experience with your employee, but instead provide a private, supportive environment to talk about what happened. It's the best first step in the healing experience. Most employees, especially those who are concerned, thoughtful, and enjoy their job, will experience an acute stress reaction: feelings of shock, anxiety and anger, and maybe later difficulty concentrating; intrusive thoughts about the incident; or even sleep disruption. These are normal symptoms of recovery, so don't minimize or rush the process. Also, these symptoms don't mean an EAP referral is a must, but encourage the program's use to help the worker feel supported. Past trauma—or historical negative interactions with customers or other people—can often surface and make overcoming a negative event of this kind an extra challenge. If adverse reactions persist or begin to interfere with the employee's ability to function, then a more direct approach to EAP referral would be indicated.

■ **I have a young employee with great ideas and initiative, but he lacks organizational awareness. Recently, he took an idea directly to our vice president without telling me or my director, making us look uninformed. How do I correct this without discouraging his initiative? Could the EAP help?**

This is not an uncommon problem among younger employees, so see this as a development problem. Organizational awareness is a learned skill. Your being caught off guard or critiqued by next-level management is irritating, but you should still validate your employee's initiative and creativity. Make it clear that these qualities are valued but working relationships can be undermined when protocol isn't followed. Most employees are shocked to hear this feedback, especially after feeling positive about their initiative, but it's an important lesson. Don't mention office politics or "how things work around here," because the feedback is important beyond any other circumstances. Simply ask that the employee come to you first before taking matters further. Explain how others need to be consulted and under what circumstances communicating directly with senior management is appropriate. EA professionals help employees examine workplace communication, so if this continues be an issue, talk to the EAP about how it can help.

NOTES

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