

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

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

June 2005

Q. I am a stickler for safety in the workplace, but without preaching constantly to employees about it, they seem to lose respect for practicing safe behaviors. Is there more to the supervisor's role?

A. A safe work environment is best won by inspiring a desire to be safe and helping employees see that everyone benefits from safe work practices. It's important to remind employees to practice safety, and studies show that education and awareness are key; however, supervisors underestimate their influence in shaping safe employee behaviors. Be sure to praise your employees when you see safety practiced. Manage troubled employees, seek to intervene in coworker conflicts, and learn the role you have in improving and maintaining morale. These endeavors contribute to happy, healthy, and productive employees, and fewer accidents result. Encourage peer influence to reinforce safe work practices and confront those that are unsafe. Model safe work practices, never glamorize risk taking, and orient new employees to safe work practices early on. Beyond "preaching," these routines will support a work culture of safety that pays off.

Q. After an employee was terminated, it was reported that she was hospitalized for depression and she threatened to hurt herself. What role should the EAP play? Should I contact the EAP? Is she still eligible for EAP services if she is no longer employed?

A. Consult with the EAP on the matter concerning your employee, and whether the EAP is available and what it can do. If your employee is ineligible for EAP services, the EAP may make an exception, or offer an alternative. The circumstances of separation from employment may influence the EAP's recommendations. Hospitals have social service departments and nursing staff that plan patient discharges and make arrangements for psychological support and aftercare as needed. These resources may be appropriate for your employee. Like downsizing and layoffs, disciplinary terminations can be stressful for coworkers. Coworkers may be adversely affected in different ways, so it is appropriate to suggest the EAP to employees to help them process feelings and reactions individually.

Q. Procrastination is a severe problem for my employee and interferes with his productivity. I have not referred him to the EAP yet, but what can the EAP do? Is procrastination a personal problem, a symptom of something else, or just a bad habit?

A. It's safe to say that all people occasionally procrastinate, but to different degrees and about different things. Procrastination is a decision to avoid something that needs to be done. Procrastination has an undesirable effect on productivity, of course, but it also has consequences for the procrastinator. Chronic procrastination contributes to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, depression, and self-doubt. The negative self-talk engaged in by people who procrastinate is often severe

and cyclical. A chronic problem with procrastination in the workplace usually signals other underlying issues, but of course, these are best determined by the EAP. Although procrastination appears to be a bad habit to the casual observer, to dismiss it as such can preclude a supervisor referral to the EAP. Refer your employee based upon his inability to complete work or carry out assignments on time.

Q. *There is a lot of stress in our organization, and many managers complain about morale problems. My employees do not appear to have morale problems, and I think it is because of me. I communicate well and pay attention to their needs. Should I take the credit?*

A. Claim the high ground. Whether morale is positive or negative, it can often be attributed to leadership style at the supervisor level, even in high-stress work environments. Unfortunately, it is often easy to blame upper management while ignoring the influence line managers have. Communicating frequently with employees and demonstrating that you sincerely care about them meets an important psychological need. As a result, they trust you. This is what inspires positive morale. Studies have shown that once positive morale exists, it tends to stick around. Employees who experience positive morale may be more forgiving of your mistakes, and those of the organization. However, the opposite is also reportedly true. Negative morale is difficult to change. If positive morale exists, you are likely tuned in to your employees' needs.

Q. *Sometimes it seems that only sales goals matter in our work unit. Can I refer my my employees to the EAP if sales are down, especially if their jobs are threatened from lack of performance?*

A. EAPs help employees who may have

personal problems improve their performance. Unsatisfactory performance is the basis for supervisor referral to the EAP. At first glance, simply falling short of one's sales goals does not appear to be a reason for a referral to the EAP. However, do great disparities exist between your employees' past and present performance? Has a pattern of lower productivity been noticed? Are you familiar with your employees' potential, and does performance not measure up to it? These may be good reasons to consider a supervisor referral. Although the EAP may not be able to impart sales knowledge and skills, it will be able to evaluate and assess whether personal problems interfere with the ability of employees to perform.

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