

Frontline Supervisor



■ **My employee moves at a snail's pace but is a good worker. I think I am seeing depression. I wish I could say that, but I know I can't. I have known this employee for 20 years. The employee should have more get-up-and-go. So how do I encourage an EAP referral?**

Are you witnessing behaviors and performance issues with your employee that can be described and measured? If so, this means you can have a discussion with your employee about correcting them. Don't worry about what underlies these behaviors. Being able to describe them and judge them as problematic to the work situation is more meaningful to motivation and more important than a diagnostic label. Consider whether you had grown accustomed to your employee's slow work pace over the years and if some new change or pattern has recently emerged to cause you to focus upon them. Have they become more severe or more frequent? Discuss with your employee your observations of slow performance, a lack of drive, and appearances of being tired. Suggest that the EAP can help in resolving these issues. Don't rule out a supervisor referral in the future.

■ **My employee complains to customers about coworkers and criticizes our products in front of them. Obviously this behavior is unacceptable and disloyal. I think we should dismiss the employee, because we can't expect the EAP to make someone loyal to the company.**

Although these inappropriate behaviors are unacceptable and demonstrate lack of loyalty, something else may be contributing to them. A supervisor referral would be a good move here, although your desire to dismiss the employee is understandable. Has your employee been loyal until only recently? Does he or she possess skills and abilities that you would like to keep if only his or her behavior would change? Your conclusion that the EAP can't make a difference is an example of armchair diagnosis, because it rules out the existence of an underlying treatable personal problem. However, there are many personal issues that could explain this behavior, such as anger, conflict at work, emotional issues of different sorts, or problems that feed the employee's willingness to act out. If any period of satisfactory performance existed in the past, then you've seen this employee's potential to return to at least that level of prior functioning. Use the EAP as a helpful productivity tool to see if you can get it back.

■ **What is the trickiest part of documentation, the part of the process that can be most challenging for supervisors?**

Documentation of employee performance is often difficult for a supervisor who does not understand how to separate his or her emotional reaction to the employee's behavior and write effective notes that clearly support his or her position. Instead, the supervisor unwittingly slips into writing documentation that personally attacks the employee or makes judgments

How does a supervisor create documentation that does not become a piece of paper that simply represents the supervisor's word over that of the employee's?

about the employee's character. Frequently, a supervisor will insist that his or her documentation is accurate and objective, even though it demonstrates the classic misstep of focusing on the employee's psychological makeup. A powerful technique, but one often omitted from supervisor documentation, is to provide concrete examples of what is being discussed—complaint letters from customers, time cards showing proof of an employee's lateness, a consultant's analysis of the employee's poor productivity. Documenting the employee's perspective and response to your position also is powerful. If you do so, offer to let the employee sign off on what you have actually written, attesting to its accuracy. Whether the employee signs the statement is not as important as demonstrating that you actually offered the opportunity to do so, which shows you are dedicated to openness and transparency.

■ Can you provide some tips that will help me be more positive and effective in evaluating my employees' performance this year? What are some trouble spots that supervisors must be careful to avoid?

The most overlooked benefit of a performance appraisal is its potential to bring employees and their supervisor closer together as partners in maximizing the employees' productivity. So, remember to view performance appraisal as a way to help employees improve, not as something that is punitive in nature. Performance evaluation meetings are a two-way street. Employees should never be surprised by your areas of concern. Ambushing them with previously unknown complaints about their performance creates distrust. Always end meetings where you are discussing performance by providing exact instructions on how your employees can improve, and be sure they understand how to earn better ratings in areas that you've marked for improvement. Focus on successes as well as shortcomings. Be sure to praise and thank individuals for tasks that they have performed well at various times during the year. Be specific! For example, when you praise an employee, say, for example, "You did an excellent job arranging that sales conference. I feel as if I can always count on you to take care of details like boosting registration."

■ I had a good conversation with the EAP about my employee's performance issues prior to making a referral. I then forgot to send the information in writing. The employee didn't cooperate with the EAP. Is it my fault the employee didn't cooperate? Can I refer again?

It's not your fault that the employee did not cooperate, but because you did not provide the information in writing, the EAP had to repeat secondhand what you shared. When this happens, employees can avoid tough issues and needed changes and minimize the severity of the performance issues they face. Still, it is likely that you will see immediate improvements in your employee's performance, no matter what. Be cautious, this is usually a short-term period of performance improvement prompted by a sense of urgency gained from the experience of being referred to the EAP. Yes, refer again if problems return, but follow your EAP's instructions in providing relevant performance information.

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