

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



■ **My employee complains about a coworker who asks too many personal questions. The employee might be asked, “What did you do this weekend?” “What about Friday night?” “Who do you socialize with?” etc. It’s not sexual harassment, but should I intervene?**

Your employee should be assertive and communicate that these personal questions are unwanted. If the questioning continues, other actions can be considered to make the behavior stop. The rule that “no means no” applies to many types of behavior that can be labeled as harassment if it doesn’t stop. Most employees read “social cues” well and after one round of such questions without the anticipated responses would give up fast. This is normal social interaction, and all of us must acquire these skills so we can interact civilly with each other. However, some employees for a variety of reasons are less adept at knowing when they are violating these social norms and going over the line. They require a clearer message. Consider a supervisor referral to the EAP as part of your intervention strategy if the behavior continues.

■ **We have experienced some severe layoffs this summer. Although my job is safe, I think it is starting to “get to me.” My symptoms include a lot of guilt and some sleep difficulties. The organization handled everything well, so am I too sensitive?**

Although your organization has done a good job in managing a layoff plan, it is not unusual for surviving employees, including supervisors, to experience grief, anxiety, depression, and other symptoms as a result of witnessing others lose their jobs. Employees who are adversely affected by layoffs but retain their jobs may experience “layoff survivor syndrome” and are sometimes referred to as the “walking wounded” by transition management experts. Currently, General Motors, American Airlines, and Motorola are facing layoffs and their aftermath. Starbucks is closing 600 stores over the next year! EAPs play critical roles in supporting employees and surviving coworkers. If your workplace is characterized by close relationships among employees and is a place where personal connections and “family culture” are exhibited, this syndrome can be strongly felt. Seek support for these confusing but normal stress symptoms.

■ **I called the medical unit after my employee became very upset—shaking uncontrollably—following an event where an employee was seriously injured. The staff there called 911. It**

You did the right thing by relying upon the medical department to help your employee so the professionals there could address this acute and difficult situation. Your concern was obviously for safety and whether your employee was okay to work (fit for duty) given the behavior you witnessed. From your perspective this situation may have appeared “all psychological,” but it was still a medical crisis requiring immediate intervention. The EAP is not designed to physically take control of an employee’s behavior, although later assessment, referral, and follow-up

appeared all psychological, so should I have called the EAP instead?

care are appropriate. EAPs work to maintain strong relationships with other departments in business organizations, so the medical department may involve the EAP in the post-treatment period. Follow instructions, if any, that the medical department gives you. Consider them your main point of contact, but feel free to discuss your concerns with the EAP.

■ I have employees who can't write effectively. Written projects, e-mails, and other types of communication are embarrassing my department. Can the EAP assist, or is this a problem EAPs don't address?

The criterion for a supervisor referral to the EAP is an employee with a performance problem. Typically, this person is not improving despite your attempts to correct the problem. True, referring an employee to the EAP because he or she can't write well is not an everyday occurrence, but it still fits the criterion. Not only are remedial courses available in the community, but online resources are also available. The problem of employees having deficient writing skills is not new, but with improvements in technology, the resources to address it are growing. One recent survey by Public Agenda found that 73% of employers report that high school graduates are deficient in their writing skills. The necessity of employers to have a competitive workforce underscores the need for addressing this concern. (Source: Public Agenda for Citizens, "Where's the Backlash", Press Release, March 5, 2002)

■ There are a million resources online to help employees with everything from being assertive to managing stress to dealing with sleep problems and improving relationships. What benefit is the EAP if all it takes is Googling a topic to get help?

There are many helpful resources online, but unfortunately, it's hard to know which ones to trust. Some of them could actually be harmful or hazardous. But even those that are well established and reputable have limitations and do not match the services and benefits of EAP assessment and referral. Helping employees entails understanding the nature of a personal problem, providing motivational counseling, and keeping the ball rolling with follow-up. Often, determining the nature of a problem is difficult, and the proper treatment may need to be thoroughly examined so there is a successful problem-solution match. Symptoms of a problem may be plain to see, and employees may argue strongly to treat them in a predetermined manner. This is not a combination that lends itself well to Googling a solution. It can be a sure path to failure in treating the true problem and in returning the employee to a level of satisfactory performance.

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