



FrontLine Supervisor

UT Employee Assistance Program • (800) 346-3549

■ **After an EAP referral for attendance issues, my employee entered a hospital. I don't know the reason, but since his return several days ago, the attendance problems have come back. He claims it's office stress. Should I be patient and wait it out before getting too concerned?**

You should contact the EAP now and document the performance concerns. The EAP will consult with you about next steps, but understanding the nature of the attendance problem will help the EA professional assess its cause and pattern. Sometimes after an employee's hospital stay for a health or behavioral issue, a supervisor's observations are crucial to EAP follow-up. EAPs follow up, of course, but this frequency does not match the daily interactions you as a supervisor have with your employee. You are therefore in the best position to spot patterns of behavior so that performance follow-up is more effective and helpful. You're not playing any sort of diagnostic role, but the organization depends on your observation and engagement with the employee to help ensure an employee's successful return to satisfactory performance. So, referral of an employee to the EAP is not a "one and done" experience, but collaboration that preserves human resources.

■ **My employee's pet dog died recently. Everyone in the office feels awful about it, but after a month, she still appears to be struggling. I am not diagnosing her, but should I ask if she is depressed and would like to visit with the EAP?**

Your employee may be depressed, but many things could contribute to a down mood, so do not ask this question because it is considered a diagnostic inquiry. Instead, describe what you observe. For example, "You appear less cheerful day to day than you used to be." "I'm concerned about your looking so down." "I've been worried about your energy level since you lost (name of dog)." Asking about depression or any diagnostic term can expose the employer to complications under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA limits employers from making medical inquiries unless they are job-related and consistent with business necessity. Even a well-intentioned question can suggest a perceived disability and trigger privacy concerns, potential discrimination claims, or obligations for accommodation the employer never intended. Show compassion, but keep focused on performance, expected improvement, and referral to the EAP for personal support.

■ **I am often slow to correct an employee or give a verbal warning for performance or conduct issues because I am afraid that I will lose the rapport I have built. How do I maintain a strong relationship in these circumstances?**

Dispensing corrective action in a verbal interview is not pleasant because it means confronting an employee regarding problems they may not want to hear about. So, your desire to avoid this tension is understandable, but not addressing performance can also erode your relationship in a cascading series of consequences. First comes confusion about expectations. Then, accountability is lowered. This is followed by the employee thinking standards don't really matter. Ultimately, small issues grow larger, morale suffers, and your credibility weakens. If you show

fairness and consistency with your employee, it's unlikely your relationship will suffer. You want your employees to understand that accountability can coexist with positive trusting relationships on the job. You will achieve this goal if you are timely with these sorts of difficult conversations. The EAP is available to help supervisors and can guide you in preparing for these conversations, offering strategies like role-plays and helping you examine more closely the resistance you experience so that you can overcome it.

■ **My employee complained about verbal spats with her spouse, so I gave her the name of a marital therapist that the EAP has given to many employees. This is an outstanding worker and there are no performance issues, but was this still a mistake?**

You should refer employees—even high-performing ones who report personal problems—directly to the EAP. This protects you from liability and ensures a thorough assessment of issues you can't explore in depth. The EAP is trained to uncover underlying problems that may be linked to surface conflicts such as verbal disputes. It's also standard EAP practice to follow up and evaluate the effectiveness of professionals they refer to in the community—something not possible under the circumstances you describe. The therapist you mentioned may be one of the EAP's referral sources, but others are available, and each employee's needs are carefully considered before a referral is made.

■ **I have been around long enough to know that what makes my job more pleasurable is a positive, low-drama work environment. I think it takes a bit of luck and skill to obtain it, but what's the general advice for supervisors in working toward achieving this goal?**

Many skills help maintain a positive work environment—one with less conflict, gossip, and negativity, and one that emphasizes goals and team success. Success comes from your consistent behaviors that nurture positivity. (It's difficult to apply a quick fix to morale and negativity issues. It's better to make your goal of a low-drama, high-positivity environment intentional.) 1) Model calmness, fairness, and respect in how you communicate with employees. 2) Address workplace tension early before gossip begins. 3) Have clear expectations—don't leave employees wondering what you want or what they are supposed to do. 4) Employees have memories like elephants—they will remember your words and expect you to keep promises. 5) Give frequent feedback in private. You'll discover these one-on-one conversations reveal the workplace "temperature," making it easier to address problems early. 6) Don't make team meetings a rare event. They are tools to recognize effort, encourage teamwork, and demonstrate transparency. This clear communication plays a powerful role in preventing speculation, gossip, and negativity.

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