

Q. If an employee approaches a supervisor about a personal problem, should he or she always be referred to the EAP no matter what the problem might be? For example, my employee complained that he hadn't seen a dentist in three years. I recommended mine.

A. If your employee asks for a recommendation for a dentist, there certainly isn't harm in sharing the name of the one you use. However, if the discussion includes reasons as to why this delay has occurred, a recommendation to talk to the EAP about those issues is appropriate. Every day, employees share personal problems with coworkers and supervisors at work. There is nothing unusual about it. However, some issues that at first appear benign are associated with severe problems that are suitable for bringing to the EAP. It is important for you as a supervisor to have a sense of curiosity about your employees and their well-being. The rationale is that your employees represent your most valuable resource. This curiosity does not mean involving yourself in employees' personal matters or diagnosing problems. But it does mean going a step further when an employee approaches you with something personal, and considering whether an EAP issue exists in the situation he or she presents. Curiosity means asking why. In your case, a delay in seeing a dentist could be associated with fear or financial hardship, among other reasons.

Q. I referred my employee to the EAP for attendance issues. He went, he signed a release, and the attendance problem is gone. The EAP was supposed to give me regular feedback, but I only heard from the counselor once. Should I assume everything is okay?

A. You should phone the EAP and inquire about communication expectations. The important goal of having the attendance problem corrected means your use of the EAP was a success. However, you are wondering if the communication process is complete. That's evidence you and the EAP are not in sync. Don't wait. Instead, reach out and inquire about what to expect when communicating with the EAP and how much longer you should anticipate the feedback continuing. If a release is no longer valid, which could be the reason communication has stopped, then the EAP will let you know. Sometimes employees fail to follow through with EAP recommendations, and they may decide to cancel a release at the same time. This could happen regardless of whether problems like absenteeism are continuing.

Q. Does an EAP exist as a benefit for the employee, the employer, or both? A daycare center, a credit union on-site, gym memberships, and the like are for employees, so is an EAP on par with these sorts of benefits that employees value?

A. The installation of EAPs has a business rationale, but so do the other services you mention because they benefit the workforce by helping workers be happier, healthier, and more productive. The workforce is any organization's most valuable resource, so in many respects there is no distinction between an employee benefit and an employer benefit made possible by a programmatic approach to helping troubled employees with personal problems that may (or may not) affect their job performance. Without supervisor education (e.g., this newsletter) and training on using them, EAPs are at risk of becoming programs that serve only as confidential counseling services of limited scope, primarily focused on the employee and not on the organization as a whole.

Q. What is the most difficult roadblock to supervisors using the EAP in managing troubled employees?

A. The most difficult roadblock supervisors face in using the EAP to manage troubled employees is making the switch from doing it all themselves, to using a systematic approach to assess, refer, treat, and follow up on a troubled employee. The old approach may include ignoring problems until they precipitate a crisis. Although an employee may sign a release that provides for limited feedback about EAP participation, a supervisor is, by design, removed entirely from involvement in the employee's problems. This shift can be difficult because the supervisor must give up the ability to control the helping process and its outcome. Turning these roles over to the EAP frees the supervisor from the burden of being an amateur diagnostician, motivational counselor, and caseworker. But this freedom is not always as welcome as it sounds. Some supervisors may feel competent in handling these roles; they may believe in their history of doing so and experience satisfaction and meaning by involving themselves in their employees' lives. Unfortunately, this approach carries significant risk for all parties concerned.

Q. Can you provide a checklist of points for meeting with an employee to confront them about performance, motivate them to correct it, and encourage them to use the EAP?

A. Talk with the EAP or recall the process of recommended steps for your organization, but the following should be helpful: 1) focus on job performance; 2) be specific; 3) ask the employee if he/she understands the situation clearly; 4) ask the employee to paraphrase what the supervisor has said; 5) ask the employee for a commitment to change; 6) set a specific time for follow-up and review; 7) explain that the employee must decide whether he/she should seek help for any personal issue that may be contributing to the performance issue; 8) explain clearly the EAP and how it works, and discuss confidentiality; 9) fully assure the worker that use of the EAP does not affect job security or promotional opportunities, and is not punitive in any way.

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