

Q. Regarding supervisor behavior, what does the phrase “silo mentality” mean? Can EAPs play a role in helping supervisors overcome this practice?

A. The phrase “silo mentality” is more applicable to the dysfunctional practice of departments within organizations isolating themselves by being concerned only with their unique purpose. Withholding information, competitiveness, communication breakdowns, and, when severe enough, nearly isolated work environments with charismatic leaders can result. Supervisors can unwittingly practice a similar behavior by isolating themselves, withholding information, failing to engage with workers, and focusing more on charts and metrics than developing their people. Avoiding this practice requires skills of engagement, collaboration, sharing information, coaching, and modeling. New supervisors are especially at risk for isolation behavior if they give in to their insecurities. Some may deny their role and hope the work unit can function without their direction by deferring to one or two strong subordinates. It may feel safer, but it is a recipe for disaster. The employee assistance program is an ideal source of help. Beyond coaching, which is more appropriately obtained from a next level manager, the EAP can confidentially assess personal issues and help the supervisor identify and overcome roadblocks to full engagement.

Q. I have always understood humor in the workplace to be a good thing. Recently I heard that this is not necessarily true. Can you explain this with respect to supervisors who do a lot of kidding around?

A. There is a difference between employees expressing humor within a psychologically safe workplace and the supervisor over-employing humor as a way to interacting and managing employees. This can heighten employee vulnerability, while at the same time making supervisors less approachable. Ironically, some humor may contribute to an intimidating and offensive work environment. Overused, humor can also send a message that there is nothing very serious about what we do here—that mistakes and problems are not to be taken seriously. This results in the loss of a healthy sense of urgency and leads to diminished performance by employees. This dynamic can prompt employees to focus on personal matters rather than workplace productivity; indeed, research has shown this to be the case. However, humor is a natural human behavior. It is not something that has to be deliberately learned or practiced. Naturally occurring, it can be an indicator of a positive work climate where employees are able to be happy, healthy, and productive. Learn more at <https://wustl.edu> (search “humor in the workplace”).

Q. I have been offered a manager position in my company, but I don’t know if I have the leadership skills to do it. I don’t mind a challenge, but isn’t leadership a natural aptitude sort of thing? Can the EAP help with my decision?

A. It is a myth that leadership can’t be learned. Here are a few rewarding challenges to master—all teachable: thinking and acting in ways that encourage others so they trust and follow you; creating a vision or a direction in which you want to lead a team; having a personal vision for yourself within this context; considering crises that can happen and how to respond to them; being optimistic (optimistic authority figures inspire others); resolving conflicts; taking charge before being told what to do; pulling others into the action; striving for excellence, not perfection; maintaining high standards and giving others credit where it is due; praising employees frequently to inspire them to produce; taking risks out of your comfort zone; being truthful with yourself; knowing your strengths and weaknesses, and depending on others with skills you lack to achieve work-unit goals; building your brand as a leading expert in one or two areas; being a credible resource others trust; being a role-model for compassion, commitment, effort, integrity, teamwork, good communication, and vision; and getting to work on time! Feeling insecure about any of these? Talk to the EAP and troubleshoot hurdles throughout your career.

Q. I am referring an employee to the EAP, but I don't have much hope things will change. He lies, manipulates, and tells people what he thinks they want to hear. The EAP is likely to be putty in his hands. Isn't this a big problem for EAPs—dishonest employees?

A. Sometimes employees do visit EAPs and lie. They attempt to manipulate the EAP and control the direction of the interview, and behave as though they are insightful and fully cooperative, but they are not. This is always short-lived because, ultimately, there is a bottom line—job security. This leverage is a vital element in EAP theory and practice. It is precious to motivation, cooperation, and the pursuit of wellness with troubled employees. Some of these employees may have extraordinary skills and training. Employment leverage saves lives. The employer is in control if performance improvement is not forthcoming. Most employees understand this reality before coming to the EAP. Very few will not grasp this reality and not feel a true sense of urgency until they are teetering on termination. This dynamic is why EAPs work. The EAP is always a problem-solving success story for the organization. The employee, however, has to decide whether it will be a success story for him or her. The greater the clarity given to a formally referred employee about expectations and consequences, the more cooperative they tend to be.

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