



SUPERVISOR NOTES

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A NEWSLETTER OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT IDEAS

Employee Assistance Program

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Q. We had an employee who was dismissed for ongoing performance issues. The employee then accused the supervisor of sexual harassment. The harassment charges had not been mentioned previously. Is this proof of retaliation? Could the EAP have talked the employee out of the accusation?

A. Although it is possible this represents retaliation, the timing of the charges is not unusual for employees who have suffered sexual harassment during their employment. Retaliation is not necessarily the motive. Here's why: Even with a policy against sexual harassment that encourages employees to come forward and be protected, an environment that does not feel safe may impede the voicing of complaints. Once terminated, the employee no longer feels constrained, and it is easier to lodge the complaint. Until then, an employee may feel some subtle punishment could ensue if a complaint was made, or that management wouldn't take a complaint seriously. Victims of sexual harassment may not want to "rock the boat." They may fear being seen as provocative or partly to blame. The thought of providing an accurate account of the sexual harassment history can also feel daunting. EAP support is always a good idea for employees facing a crisis, but the EAP is not a "fire wall" after the fact. An organization's best intervention is prevention through education and zero tolerance of harassment.

Q. An employee complained of being punched in the arm by a coworker. The "puncher" said it was "in jest", and that no violent intent was meant. My own kids do this sort of thing. There is a bruise, but some people bruise easily. Is this a serious matter? Or should I dismiss this?

A. Violence at work, like harassment, is not defined by what the perpetrator had in mind. The violent act occurred, the coworker was struck, and harm ensued. Just as important, you have been notified and a complaint has been brought. If you dismiss this incident, it could be established that you responded to it with negligence and apathy. If a similar incident, or something worse, were to occur in the future, how you responded to this incident could be held against you. This incident may appear to you as innocent horseplay or roughhousing, but it didn't happen in your home. This occurred in the workplace between adults, and these facts make all the difference. Investigate properly, consult with your manager or Chair and also HR, document how you responded, and treat the complaint with seriousness and resolve. Remember, you are enforcing a standard about what constitutes acceptable behavior in the workplace and your actions, or inactions, let everyone know what is appropriate.

Q. What does the phrase "tough love" mean with regard to the role supervisors play in managing troubled employees?

A. Demonstrating "tough love" toward a troubled employee describes detachment or "stepping away" from feelings or emotions that cause you to enable conduct and performance problems. You are then free to act in a way that allows the employee to experience accountability or consequences for problematic performance or conduct on the job. Tough love reflects a change in attitude by the enabler. Detachment isn't easy. Close relationships between people, whether they are employees, friends, or family members, include a natural and healthy drive to protect and support them. This dynamic, however, can contribute to the person's problems if solving them requires tough decisions the enabled person would rather avoid. Enabling is "permission" to avoid change. Tough love makes the need for change in the workplace behaviors nonnegotiable.

Call the EAP for a confidential consultation about supervisory concerns, job-related issues or personal problems.

Information contained in *Supervisor Notes* is for general information purposes only and is not intended as specific guidance for any particular supervisor or human resource management concern. For specific guidance on handling individual employee problems, consult with one of our Employee Assistance Program professionals.