



SUPERVISOR NOTES

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A NEWSLETTER OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT IDEAS

Employee Assistance Program

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Question: I am not sure that I am cut out to supervise people. I hesitate to confront my employees, and I dread meeting with them in a group. Sometimes I delegate supervision to others, and I avoid meeting with complainers. Should I look for another job or use the EAP to help me?

Answer: Before you conclude that you're not equipped to manage people, discuss your concerns with an EA professional. Each of the issues you've mentioned is a common challenge that supervisors face. Many supervisors dislike confrontation and take pains to avoid it. You may never learn to enjoy it, but you can develop strategies to communicate clearly and diplomatically in potentially adversarial situations. Dreading team meetings may stem from shyness, discomfort with group dynamics, or other factors. The EAP can help you develop strategies to assert yourself in groups and become more comfortable leading discussions and giving presentations. Delegation is actually a learned skill. Effective supervisors usually learn that in order to gain power, they have to give some of it up. So the fact that you allow others to step into your role may actually work to your advantage, as long as you remain accountable for the results.

Question: One of my employees has benefited greatly from the EAP. If she gives me permission to cite her as an example of how it can help, can I direct other workers to her who want to learn more about the EAP?

Answer: Regardless of whether or not she gives permission, it's a bad idea to refer other workers to her to discuss the EAP. This creates a dangerous precedent; employees should never be placed in a position of providing testimony about their EAP experiences. For starters, this would reduce the anonymity that EAP clients often need. It might also taint others' perceptions of how the EAP works. Moreover, your employee may be subtly pressured by peers to reveal sensitive information that she may later regret divulging. If employees want to learn more about the EAP, direct them to promotional venues such as brochures or to a Web site. A positive personal experience with the EAP, if you feel comfortable sharing it, would also be helpful.

Question: We terminated an employee for poor performance. He was participating in the EAP at the time, but the job action was unrelated. Others now fear that their jobs will be jeopardized if I refer them to the EAP. How can I convince them that the termination was totally unrelated?

Answer: Policies that establish EAPs always include the provision that participation cannot cause an employee's job security or promotional opportunities to be threatened. Both the policy and the organizational culture must make it clear to employees that getting help is a positive and useful step that top administration supports. Undoubtedly, employees see that the vast majority of people who use the EAP remain in their jobs without incident. Still, it is important to remind employees of the EAP policy to allay fears and false associations like the one you describe. Although you cannot discuss confidential information, remind employees that using the EAP is considered a positive thing, not a negative one. When everyone understands your department's grounds for termination—unacceptable performance despite repeated written and oral warnings—then they will see that the EAP can only help, not hurt.

Question: I returned from medical leave to find that my temporary replacement made me look bad. My employees say my replacement did a better job treating everyone fairly than I do. I think I'm a fair supervisor, but apparently, I'm not seen that way. How can I prove that I'm fair?

Answer: Rather than trying to prove that you're fair, commit to adopting certain skills and behaviors that will contribute to a more positive work environment for your staff. Examples include listening respectfully and patiently to employees' ideas and opinions; following up after they submit suggestions or make requests; promptly sharing information that affects their job security; involving them in collective decision-making; enforcing workplace rules consistently (so that you don't play favorites); and always telling the truth. In addition to enhancing your stature as an effective leader, your commitment to fairness can influence your team's health. According to a recent medical research study, reported on by the American Medical Association, (AMA, Justice at Work, Nov. 10, 2005), a sense of fair treatment at work can reduce workers' stress levels, lowering the risk of coronary heart disease among employees.

Question: One of my employees broke up with his girlfriend, and he's despondent. He tells anyone who will listen how unhappy and confused he feels. His peers are sympathetic, but he's still sad and distracted. His work remains acceptable, but should I refer him to the EAP?

Answer: His "work" may be acceptable, but his performance is problematic if you are documenting his distraction. Consider that performance includes attitude, attendance, and conduct on the job, as well as the quality of work. Although you can't focus on his plight as a supervisor, a referral is appropriate because distraction can be documented. People handle despondency in different ways. Some internalize it and try to mask their pain. Others, like your employee, want to discuss their experience. Doing some of this at work is quite normal, but if a worker repeatedly shares his unhappiness and confusion with his coworkers, it can become a workplace distraction. There's also the danger that his sadness will prove contagious and adversely affect everyone's attitude. What's more, well-intentioned peers may give him inappropriate advice on how to handle the problem. In short, the present behavior is hardly the best way for your employee to work through a difficult breakup. By referring him to the EAP for support during this rocky period, you give him a safe, confidential environment to gain perspective and develop coping tools under the guidance of a trained professional.

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 your Employee Assistance Program professional.