

# THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

*Helping you manage your most valuable resource: Employees*

**April 2023**

The following are answers to common questions supervisors have related to their employees and making EAP referrals. As always, if you have specific questions about referring an employee or managing a workgroup issue, feel free to make a confidential call to EAP for a management consultation at 608-775-4780 or 800-327-9991.

**Q:** I feel almost helpless in my ability to confront an employee I've known for 14 years. I admit it, I'm her primary enabler, but it's tough acting and risking the loss of a good relationship I've acquired over the years.

**A:** It's tough confronting employees you supervise when they are also your friends, particularly when the dual relationship has been long term. To make it easier, consider factors that prevent you from taking confrontational action. For example, an employee-friend is also aware of the importance of the relationship and knows how difficult it is for you to confront her, which by itself can fuel continuing problems. Taking action to help her improve job performance, and possibly addressing a personal problem, is an act of caring, not aggression, on your part. If you sense that she may try to manipulate you with guilt to keep you from taking action, the quality of your relationship may be dubious. In the long run, a real friendship should withstand the strain that a necessary confrontation will cause.

**Q:** Self-help books and motivational tapes have helped me deal with some important problems in my life, so I don't hesitate to recommend them to others. Should I avoid making such recommendations at work?

**A:** A wealth of good resources is available by mail and at retail establishments dealing with everything from losing weight to fixing relationships. Recommending such resources to friends outside of work is one thing, but recommending them to those you supervise is another. In general, recommending books or tapes to help employees deal with serious personal or family problems would not be appropriate for a supervisor. On the other hand, general discussions with others about resources that have helped you is not playing a diagnostic or referral role. Generally, passing on information about self-help resources you have found useful becomes a problem if your employee first shared personal problems with you that should be referred to EAP. If you do not make a referral at that point, you are playing a diagnostic and referral role if you direct the employee to a source of help. Calling EAP is a good rule to follow whenever you're unsure of what to say or do.

**Q:** I've heard the term "arm-chair diagnostician" used to describe how supervisors should not try to figure out an employee's underlying problem. Does this refer to quizzing the employee about his or her personal life?

**A:** It means that and more. One of the most subtle forms of “diagnosing” occurs when a supervisor fails to refer an employee to EAP, reasoning that the employee’s problematic behavior is “simply part of that person’s personality” or because no personal problem is apparent. By ruling out a diagnosis, the supervisor is, in effect, “diagnosing by default.” A supervisor, who decides that a job problem is not related to a personal problem because he or she can’t detect one, may tend to rule out a referral to EAP. It is helpful to remember that the fundamental reason for supervisors referring an employee to EAP is not a personal problem----- it’s job performance. If job performance problems don’t improve despite your attempt as a supervisor to correct them, recommending EAP is your next step.

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