

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

Helping you manage your most valuable resource: Employees

September 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: Supervisor referrals to EAP are always based upon unsatisfactory performance or behavior, but I sometimes also help employees see the benefit of getting help for personal problems. Is it okay to soften the supervisor referral in this way?

A: Making a supervisor referral is not a punitive act that needs to be “softened.” Couching your referral with a discussion about personal problems could undermine motivation to visit EAP rather than the other way around. Encourage employees to seek help for personal problems only when they mention them first. Commend employees for recognizing their personal problems, but do not become a “motivational counselor” when making a supervisor referral. Initiating discussions about personal problems puts you in a diagnostic role and connects the supervisor referral to a personal problem. The shift in focus away from performance provides a reason to decline the EAP referral if the employee thinks the problem doesn’t exist or can be solved someplace else or disagrees with your conclusions entirely. Ironically, even if performance problems are substantial, an employee who spends time discussing the nature of personal problems with the supervisor can lose motivation to visit EAP.

Q: I feel frustrated with EAP. My employee is apparently following through with its recommendations, but performance isn’t improving. When I mention the possibility of disciplinary action, the EAP professional is silent. Should I interpret this silence as non-support?

A: You should assume the EAP professional is officially neutral on the question of administrative or disciplinary actions you consider in response to ongoing problems. EAP theory establishes non-interference with such actions. You may feel awkward considering an adverse action knowing your employee is following through with EAP recommendations, but your focus must remain on performance. Talk with your employee about performance remaining unsatisfactory. Ask EAP and the employee what you or the organization could do to help her be successful. You have been a diligent supervisor by taking this step. It is the employee’s responsibility to let you know if she needs some accommodation to help her improve performance, but you can also ask. Also remember EAP can’t guarantee an employee’s performance will turn around after a referral, even if the personal problem is resolved.

Q: My employee says he can’t work day shift because of childcare problems. Why should this kind of problem be handled by EAP?

A: EAP is a resource for any personal problem. Of course, EAP cannot provide childcare services, but it can conduct research on community resources necessary to help your employee deal with this difficult problem. Always remember that there may be more to an employee's problem than what is being presented. All employee problems have the potential for being symptoms of other, more serious problems. A real life example is the case of an EAP counselor who learned that the reason the employee wanted to be home during the day was to safeguard his children from his wife. She was a chronic alcoholic and addicted to pills. She drank during the day and was unable to safely care for the children. She blamed him for her drinking. Again, any problem could be appropriate for an EAP referral, including problems associated with elder care, indebtedness and the law.

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