

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource--Employees

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Q. Other than “what to say” and “how to say it,” what is the most important thing supervisors can do to improve the likelihood of employees accepting supervisor referrals to the employee assistance program EAP?

A. One important thing is to avoid accidentally reinforcing common myths and misconceptions about EAPs. No matter how well an employee assistance program is promoted or its confidentiality ensured, misunderstandings about EAPs will occur. For example, avoid any indication that you are basing the referral on your belief in the existence of a psychological problem. (Myth: Going to the EAP means I have a psychological problem.) Be hopeful and positive. (Myth: A supervisor referral is a preliminary step to disciplinary action.) Keep the focus on performance and how employee assistance professionals help employees improve performance. (Myth: The EA professional will force me to answer personal and intrusive questions.) Let the employee know that records of EAP attendance are not in personnel files. (Myth: Going to the EAP will be a promotion-killing black mark on my record.)

Q. I know praising employees for their good work reinforces repeat performances. I want to be positive with my employees. Can you give me tips on how to use praise more effectively—perhaps in ways that aren't commonly understood?

A. A less considered yet powerful way to use praise is to shower your employees with it in

front of others *both before and after* you delegate a task. For example, suppose your work unit is giving a presentation to top management about last year's activities. You want Mary to deliver the presentation. In front of her peers, consider praising her while you delegate the assignment. For example, “I would like Mary to take the lead on this executive presentation. I know that with her organizational skills and gift for public speaking, she will do a fabulous job and make a great impression for our work unit.” Notice that you not only praise Mary for her ability to do a great job, but you reference specifics associated with her public speaking proficiency and organizational skills. This leverages your praise to make it effective. Employees who are praised in this manner feel more energetic in advance of the assignments, and they sharpen their focus to go the extra mile with better products or outcomes.

Q. I am trying to do a better job at delegating work. Are there any important points about delegating assignments to employees that help ensure work will be done with superior results?

A. When supervisors delegate, they often neglect a few key points needed to make delegation a process of growth, not just an assigned task. Your goal in delegating is to get work accomplished and also to expand your employee's capabilities. Unless key steps are taken, many problems can ensue with delegation, the most significant of which is the inability to let go of control. Instead of monitoring progress, you are compelled to meddle and thereby frustrate your worker. To help ensure better delegation: 1) Explain the assignment and what

you anticipate as a successful or satisfactory outcome. 2) Explain the importance of the assignment to the organization, its bottom line, and how your employee will grow from the experience. 3) Monitor to show an interest in the outcome, but monitor less on the details of the project. 4) Make sure your employee has everything needed to produce the expected outcome—resources, accountability, authority, etc.

Q *How do I manage employees who are not poor performers yet take up an inordinate amount of my time? Examples are needing a lot of attention to understand assignments, being too emotional when faced with small irritations, etc. It's hard to quantify these issues.*

A. Many undesirable employee behaviors or performance issues are not easily found on a performance issues checklist. The easiest way to overcome this problem is to meet with the EAP for a management consult. Decide together upon the right description of your employee's behavior and—more important—how to quantify or measure it so it can be documented. Even if these behaviors are not what you would ultimately call terminable offenses, the EAP can offer constructive confrontation and corrective interviewing techniques that will work. Always assume there are strategies to correct almost any undesirable employee behavior with the help of a referral.

Q. *Can the EAP serve as a witness in my meeting with an employee so that later, if problems return and serious disciplinary action is contemplated, the EAP's credibility and neutrality can attest to the fair treatment given to the troubled employee?*

A. Although there are no standards of practice that would directly prohibit the EAP from participating in a meeting of this type, it would be ill-advised. Using the EAP to support management's interests in this way would conflict with the EAP's true purpose. An EAP is a "program of attraction" that uses confidentiality and neutrality to draw troubled employees to it. Such a meeting could damage the EAP's credibility and thereby taint the EAP's position of neutrality. Employees could easily perceive the EAP is an advocate for management decreasing its utilization. An employee who rejected the EAP's findings would not be a positive voice for the program. It is more useful to have another manager or management advisor in such a meeting and to document the meeting well. The neutrality of EAPs is a sensitive and perishable commodity. Guard it because troubled and at-risk employees depend on it as draws to the program.



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