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QUANTUM
Frontline Supervisor

■ I've referred the same employee to the EAP twice in six months with no lasting improvement. At what point do repeated referrals become a substitute for the disciplinary action I should be taking?

Your question raises an important issue that supervisors often need help understanding more thoroughly. The EAP is not a substitute for disciplinary action. A supervisor may recommend or make a formal referral to the EAP based on job-related concerns, but there need be no delay in addressing conduct, attendance, or work issues. Managers sometimes accommodate struggling employees by holding disciplinary action in abeyance while they participate in the EAP to get needed help, but agreed-upon improvement and workplace expectations are what solely drive the process and management's decisions about next steps. Supervisors remain responsible for monitoring work outcomes and making employment decisions based on observable results. The EAP is never a roadblock, a "safe harbor," or in any way an impediment to acting as needed to manage employees effectively. The classic example is an employee referred to the EAP for attendance problems while the supervisor asks how soon punctuality should improve. Answer: Immediately.

■ My employee agreed to the EAP referral but then only attended one session and stopped. Can I require ongoing attendance as a condition of continued employment?

The EAP is a strictly voluntary program and remains so even if the employee is given an opportunity to accept participation in lieu of some administrative action. The program's voluntary nature is a key factor in its attraction. To alter this feature would undermine the program's use and increase behavioral risk to the organization from poor utilization or the most serious at-risk employees not self-referring. Some companies may establish agreements with employees that include the choice of voluntarily participating in the EAP or facing disciplinary action for a serious infraction of a work rule, like drinking on the job or some other offense where termination is deemed appropriate by existing policies. These agreements do not change or alter the nature of an employee assistance program as being voluntary. Such agreements are strictly between the employer and the employee.

■ I made an EAP referral and the employee went. Now she's back and performing better — but I heard she's telling coworkers the EAP "fixed" her supervisor's

If your employee's performance is satisfactory, the EAP was successful. She made the changes needed. What she tells others and what you heard secondhand are not necessarily concerning, and likely less accurate than what was originally said or overheard, so ignore it. Be assured, the EAP will not tell your employee that you are the problem and align itself with the worker in this way. Likewise, there is no need to comment or change

unfair criticism of her and that the EAP said I was the one with the issues, not her. How do I handle this narrative?

the narrative through other employees. Doing so risks greater conflict, improper disclosures, and greater disruption. Your documentation of the original performance issues speaks for itself. If she is representing her own interpretation to peers, there is no need to involve yourself in managing these discussions. Just stay focused on the working relationship going forward.

■ **Can I make an EAP referral for an employee whose only problem seems to be that he cannot get along with one specific coworker?**

How severe is the conflict, and how much is it disrupting the work unit? The answers to these questions should govern your response. In most cases, you can involve the EAP, but first make a reasonable effort to address the issue directly by meeting with both employees and guiding them toward a workable solution. The EAP is not a substitute for core supervisory responsibilities. Helping employees resolve conflict is part of a supervisor's role. That said, the EAP can be a valuable consultation resource for guidance on how to approach the situation effectively. Also remember that rarely does only one person cause workplace conflict. Consulting with the EAP may help you better understand the scope of the problem, how it developed, contributing factors, and practical strategies for resolution.

■ **My employee grieved a termination action, claiming she never received a clear warning. My documentation shows multiple meetings, but I now realize my language was a bit vague and noncommittal. What can I learn from this?**

Most documentation that's deemed inadequate is missing specifics, objectivity, or enough details regarding an incident to support a job action. The following six-item checklist covers the bases. Keep it handy. 1) Detail what happened — just the facts. Include whatever is observable and measurable. Avoid intangibles like judgments, your feelings, speculations, and intent. 2) Document when/where the problem occurred: dates, times, frequency. 3) Specify what policy, expectation, or performance standard was affected. Here, you are connecting the issue to job requirements. 4) Discuss the impact on productivity, morale, customers, safety, etc. You're showing the consequences of the behavior or performance issue on key business operations. 5) Include past corrective actions taken, including verbal and/or written warnings, and provide better instructions and expectations. 6) Also include the results of the past actions taken and document the employee's response, any improvements, how long they lasted, repeating concerns, and any return of problems. Never vent, moralize, label the employee, diagnose, sound angry, or show frustration in documentation.

NOTES

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