QUANTUM Frontline Supervisor

Morale on my team seems flat. No one is in crisis, but people seem less enthusiastic, less innovative, and less willing to take initiative than they used to be. Is it just the times we're in, or can I do something about it?

You are not imagining it. Gallup's 2026 *State of the Global Workplace* report found that worldwide employee engagement fell to 20% in 2025, the lowest level since 2020, with the sharpest decline among managers themselves. In the U.S., only about 31% of employees describe themselves as engaged. Constant change, heavy workloads, economic uncertainty, and worry about how AI and restructuring may affect their jobs all play a part, and most employees won't voice these concerns to you directly. The encouraging news is that your role matters more than almost anything else: Gallup finds that managers account for at least 70% of the variance in team engagement. Research on "servant leadership" points in the same direction. Supervisors who listen well, show empathy and awareness, invest in each person's growth, and emphasize pulling together as a team tend to have more engaged employees. Practical steps include brief, regular one-on-one check-ins, prompt recognition of good work, transparency about changes, and asking employees what gets in the way of doing their best work. Don't overlook your own engagement, either. If you are running on empty, the EAP is available to you, too.

What is the definition of reasonable suspicion? How do I know if what I am calling reasonable suspicion will be upheld if my decision is ever reviewed or investigated?

Reasonable suspicion is more than a hunch, but it does not require proof. It is a recognized standard found in drug-free workplace policies that allow testing for cause. It must be based on specific, contemporaneous, articulable observations (facts you can clearly describe) concerning the employee's appearance, behavior, speech, or body odors, along with the rational conclusions drawn from those facts. For employees covered by U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) rules, this language comes directly from federal regulations, and the observations must be made by a supervisor who has completed the required reasonable suspicion training. Rumors, past history, or a general sense that "something is off" are not enough. Write down exactly what you saw, heard, and smelled, when it occurred, and who else observed it, and complete your documentation promptly; DOT rules generally require a signed written record within 24 hours. Legal cannabis has made this area more complicated. Many states protect some off-duty use, so focus on signs of impairment at work rather than assumptions. (DOT-covered employees remain prohibited from using marijuana regardless of state law.) Using a checklist helps you capture everything observable, and documentation built on several specific facts, rather than one or two, is far more likely to hold up if questioned. Always follow your organization's policy and involve human resources before acting.

■ **A fellow supervisor says correcting performance is the supervisor's job, not the EAP's, and he never makes referrals. Many of us also know he has a drinking problem. Could his avoidance of the EAP be connected to his own drinking?**

It's possible. Some supervisors steer clear of the EAP out of fear that making a referral will somehow lead to their own problems being diagnosed or confronted. That fear is understandable but unfounded. When you consult with Quantum or refer an employee, the focus stays on helping the referred employee and on your management concerns, not on your personal life. Doing otherwise would violate a principle called "client self-determination." An EAP is voluntary, and its success depends on being a "program of attraction" that people trust enough to use. Confronting supervisors about private issues during a referral would erode that trust, lower utilization, and increase risk to the organization. Your colleague is right that supervisors are responsible for correcting performance, but the EAP is one of the most effective tools for doing exactly that. It is also a confidential resource he can use for himself at any time. If his drinking is affecting his own work, that is a concern for his manager, who can consult with the EAP about how to address it.

■ **Should I expect an employee to act offended if they are referred to Quantum?**

Some employees may react defensively because they hear the referral as a statement that you believe they have a personal problem, a mental health condition, or an addiction. This reaction is more likely when employees don't understand how EAPs work, missed or have forgotten their EAP orientation, or still feel stigma about seeking help. You know your role is to focus on performance and leave counseling to the professionals, but your employee may not. You can head off defensiveness by explaining calmly that the referral is based only on the performance issues you've discussed, nothing more. Stress that the EAP is confidential, that participation isn't recorded in their personnel file, and that you won't be told what they discuss without their written permission. It also helps to mention that employees use the EAP for everyday concerns like stress, family matters, finances, and workload. A brief, matter-of-fact tone works better than a lengthy explanation, and following up in writing with Quantum's contact information makes the next step easy.

■ **I've suggested a dozen times that my employee contact the EAP for whatever is behind his attendance problems, but he hasn't gone. Is it time to take disciplinary action?**

It may be time for a different approach. You have probably noticed that your employee improves for a short while after each of your conversations, then slips again. These short-lived improvements often signal that he is trying, without lasting success, to control whatever is contributing to the problem. Repeated suggestions to "get help" rarely work because they carry no real urgency. Instead, coordinate with your human resources advisor about making a formal supervisor referral to Quantum based on the documented attendance problem. In your meeting, describe the attendance pattern and its impact, offer the referral as an opportunity to resolve it, and make clear that the disciplinary process will move forward if attendance doesn't improve. Keep the tone one of concern and support, reinforcing that he is valued and that you want him to succeed. Genuine support combined with clear consequences creates the urgency that casual suggestions don't. Accepting a referral doesn't excuse future problems, so continue to hold him to the same standards. Call Quantum if you would like help planning the conversation.

NOTES

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