**Questions & Answers**

Q. I manage my employees’ performance problems by doing everything I can to help them improve. If that fails, I refer them to the EAP. Sometimes they are willing to attend, and sometimes not. Is this a proper use of the EAP?

A. You are using the EAP properly to address job performance issues, but using it sooner rather than later has advantages you should consider. Don’t see the EAP as a last resort or final step. A recommendation by the supervisor to use the EAP only after other approaches can be resisted by troubled employees who see the supervisor as an adversary in the struggle over unsatisfactory performance. This dynamic can lead the employee to shrug off your recommendation to use the EAP. Try to avoid reaching this stage since you risk the loss of the worker, which is a pricey outcome if the employee is highly skilled. Instead, begin mentioning the EAP at the first sign of deteriorating performance. You’ll have more personal influence early on and less resistance later if a formal referral becomes necessary.

Q. I have an employee who does not measure up to the performance standards of others on our team. Can you suggest ways to facilitate improvements that I may not have considered before I recommend the EAP?

A. Your team gives you an advantage for helping your employee improve performance. First review the workload. Some employees in resource-stressed organizations often fool themselves into thinking they can manage heavy workloads and take whatever is thrown their way without asking for help. Make sure the workload is balanced among team members. Are you rotating assignments among them? If not, cross-train, and then swap duties and gauge what happens. Some employees excel at one type of work more than another. Rotate job assignments; this employee may surprise you by demonstrating a range of skills. Don’t pigeonhole the employee because you assume he or she has just one narrow area of expertise. Also, try pairing up teammates. Ask an outstanding team member to mentor a poor performer for a few weeks. This is a practical way to evaluate skill deficits and problems. Even though you are not ready to refer, still consult with the EAP during this evaluation period. You’ll gain insight and be better prepared to refer the employee to the EAP when that becomes necessary.

Q. How do I know whether an employee’s behavior reflects mental illness to the point of needing a psychiatrist or professional counselor? And should I refer to the EAP first or seek a fitness-for-duty certification?

A. You will not be able to make a determination of mental illness in your official capacity as a supervisor. Getting too focused on whether your employee is mentally ill will lead to a delay in taking appropriate action. In an extreme situation, this could create a hazard for others. If you witness unsafe behavior that interferes with the workplace or jeopardizes a safe work environment, or if you see behavior that in your judgment indicates the employee is unable to perform essential duties safely, then follow your organization’s fitness-for-duty policy or the guidance provided by your human resources representative. An EAP referral may also be appropriate in tandem with this step, but safety issues take priority over the success of an EAP referral, which can come later.
**Questions & Answers**

**Q.** What's the most significant problem in the workplace that inhibits productivity, causes conflicts between workers and managers, and creates the most risk for employees and the organization?

The answer is poor workplace communication. Because nothing happens without communication, and because every dimension of an organization’s mission depends on communication, it will always be the single most important influencer of productivity or lack of it. We are not talking about just sending and receiving messages. There is no end to getting communication right, but here’s a hint: Think “barriers.” There are many types of barriers that affect every possible type of workplace communication. For an example of how veiled these barriers can be in one area alone, consider new hires. Upon hiring new workers, you should always provide a performance plan that describes the most important duties in detail and how they should be completed. It sounds simple, but EAPs commonly receive this surprisingly common complaint from employees: “I don’t know what they want me to do.” Or, “No one has given me a job description.” Imagine the conflict, misunderstanding, anger; and productivity issues that this communication barrier creates.

**Q.** I support an inclusive workforce, but I worry my older workers are more likely to burn out, struggle, resist new technologies, possibly have more illnesses, or get along poorly with younger supervisors. Should I be concerned?

Plenty of research demonstrates that these are stereotypes. Older workers often get high marks for loyalty, reliability, and having a deeper network of contacts than younger workers who often must attend to and balance many more work-life demands. Older workers, because of their experience, may also understand much more about leadership, the doctrine of completed staff work, proper delegation of assignments, communication and relationship development, teamwork, listening, and the problem-solving process; in addition, they often have better writing skills. These days, workers of all ages have been exposed to technology. Workers in their 60s right now have used computers for decades. Understanding old technology makes it easier to understand newer technology. Developmental psychology tells us that the older we get, the more we are motivated by giving back; causes that support the community and passing on knowledge to others are key values for older workers.

**Q.** My employee periodically refers to himself as an alcoholic but has been sober for 22 years. Why does he use this term?

Many alcoholics in an active recovery (especially 12-step programs) who are abstinence from alcohol and mood-altering substances refer to themselves as alcoholics or recovering alcoholics depending on whom they are with and the context of the social or occupational setting. The recognition that one is an alcoholic is not unlike employees who refer to themselves as diabetic even if the disease is well-managed. Many alcoholics believe their very next drink could be the one that leads to their death, because they have come so close to it in the past, tried so many times to get sober, or both. Their sobriety is therefore first and foremost. This attitude of awareness and gratitude is one of self-preservation. Practicing and feeling comfortable with describing oneself as an alcoholic is usually viewed as an important part of their awareness of who they are and the fragile nature of sobriety.

APS Healthcare’s Employee Assistance Program. The EAP program through APS Healthcare assists organizations and their workforce in managing the personal challenges that impact employee well-being, performance and effectiveness. APS’ life management consultants employ a comprehensive approach that identifies issues impacting the employee and assists them in developing meaningful solutions.

**Please call the phone number for more information about your Employee Assistance Program and the services available to you.**

1-866-598-3978

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