

SOLUTIONS

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Question: We had an employee who was dismissed for ongoing performance issues. The employee then accused the supervisor of sexual harassment. The harassment charges had not been mentioned previously. Is this proof of retaliation? Could the EAP have talked the employee out of the accusation?

Answer: The timing of the charges is not unusual for employees who have suffered sexual harassment during their employment. Retaliation is usually not the motive. Here's why: Even with a policy against sexual harassment that encourages employees to come forward and be protected, an environment that does not feel safe may impede the voicing of complaints. Once terminated, the employee no longer feels constrained, and it is easier to lodge the complaint. Until then, an employee may feel some subtle punishment could ensue if a complaint was made, or that management wouldn't take a complaint seriously. Victims of sexual harassment may not want to rock the boat, or they may fear being seen as provocative or partly to blame. The thought of providing an accurate account of the sexual harassment history can also feel daunting. EAP support is always a good idea for employees facing a crisis, but the EAP is not a "fire wall" after the fact. An organization's best intervention is prevention through education and zero tolerance for harassment.

Question: I read somewhere that approximately half of the workforce in America is stressed about the economy, especially since many people have lost money. A counselor can't replace the money, so what can the EAP do?

Answer: Losing a lot of money or a percentage of one's net worth is enormously stressful. And while no one can replace the losses associated with the stock market, do not underestimate the value of listening, support, and professional assessment as critical first steps in preventing or limiting the mental health affects of the financial crisis and accepting the reality of what has happened. Once this occurs, a person can turn to the task of working toward adapting to the new reality with a plan to cope with financial limitations or to rebuild financial resources. People cope with crisis, fear, and panic differently, but if other personal problems coexist with these states, then such an event can magnify feelings of desperation and hopelessness. Like the death of a loved one, a great loss can trigger depression and other health effects. The EAP will work diligently to help your employee survive the loss and live for a hopeful future.



Question: I have an employee with a lot of personal problems at home and at work. After a domestic dispute, the employee reportedly collapsed and couldn't walk. Doctors couldn't figure it out, but one said it was caused by stress. Is such a thing possible?

Answer: Although it is unusual, the answer is yes. The human body can endure a lot of stress, both physically and psychologically, but the more stress one is subjected to, the greater the risk for overload. The result can be the physical manifestation of the stress imposed by the nervous system. In this case, you are describing a “conversion disorder,” which is a mental illness characterized by loss of physical functioning without any physiological reason. The symptoms usually appear suddenly and under extreme psychological stress. If, while at work, a stressed employee demonstrates behaviors or performance concerns that are not acceptable, consider a supervisory referral to the EAP. Some people over-adapt to stress in their lives or personal environment, and their denial of its effects may contribute to their increased risk of severe or unusual stress reactions.

Question: I called the medical unit after my employee became very upset—shaking uncontrollably—following an event where an employee was seriously injured. The staff there called 911. It appeared all psychological, so should I have called the EAP instead?

Answer: You did the right thing by relying upon the medical department to help your employee so the professionals there could address this acute and difficult situation. Your concern was obviously for safety and whether your employee was okay to work (fit for duty) given the behavior you witnessed. From your perspective this situation may have appeared “all

psychological,” but it was still a medical crisis requiring immediate intervention. The EAP is not designed to physically take control of an employee's behavior, although later assessment, referral, and follow-up care are appropriate. EAPs work to maintain strong relationships with other departments in business organizations, so the medical department may involve the EAP in the post-treatment period. Follow instructions, if any, that the medical department gives you. Consider them your main point of contact, but feel free to discuss your concerns with the EAP.

Question: I have a couple of difficult employees. Both have their own way of encouraging issues associated with communication, productivity, morale, and interpersonal conflict. Is there a difference between a difficult employee and a troubled employee in “EAP speak”?

Answer: The word “difficult employee” has been used predominantly by journal writers, pop business columnists, and management book authors, but is not as frequently seen in professional EAP literature, which prefers the term “troubled employee.” Troubled employee more accurately describes the nature of the problem facing the manager—an employee performing unsatisfactorily in some way, who may have an underlying personal problem that affects quality of work, attendance, or behavior on the job. Within EAP literature, the goal is to assist managers in understanding how to focus on employee performance and make a supervisor referral to the EAP as the most effective way of intervening with a troubled employee. The EAP can then help the employee become motivated to identify and resolve personal problems that underlie the difficult behavior that you see.

Question: An employee complained of being punched in the arm by a coworker. The “puncher” said it was “in jest”, and that no violent intent was meant. My own kids do this sort of thing. There is a bruise, but some people bruise easily. Is this an EAP matter? Or should I dismiss this?

Answer: Violence at work is not defined by what the perpetrator had in mind. The violent act occurred, the coworker was struck, and harm ensued. Just as important, you have been notified and a complaint has been brought. If you dismiss this incident, it could be established that you responded to it with negligence and apathy. If a similar incident, or something worse, were to occur in the future, how you responded to this incident could be held against you. This incident may appear to you as innocent horseplay or roughhousing, but it didn’t happen in your home. This occurred in the workplace between adults, and these facts make all the difference. Investigate properly, refer the perpetrator to the EAP, document how you responded, consult with a management advisor, and treat the complaint with seriousness and resolve.

Question: What are some of the award-winning characteristics of outstanding workplaces that include the role of the supervisor?

Answer: Every year, trade organizations and journals announce winners of contests for outstanding workplaces. These winners are often cited for having effective work cultures that produce high morale and productivity. Many factors of their work culture link directly to supervisor behavior. These include:

- Helping employees reduce bureaucratic roadblocks to their personal achievement;
- Encouraging open dialogue and the debate of ideas;

- Finding ways to help employees increase their knowledge;
- Helping employees stay abreast of the latest twists in their fields;
- Offering flexible work arrangements;
- Giving predictable feedback with multiple follow-up points for additional feedback prior to evaluations;
- Fostering interdepartmental teamwork and understanding;
- Mentoring;
- Involving employees in a continual discussion about their future potential with the company;
- Encouraging employee input about the future direction of the organization; and
- Offering formal training to improve effective group and team relationships.

Question: What is presenteeism and why has it become such a popular term in the workplace?

Answer: Presenteeism describes the phenomenon of coming to work while physically or emotionally ill only to experience a reduction in effectiveness and productivity. Coming to work with a common cold and being unable to perform at par is a simple example. Another example is working while experiencing burnout, or after a traumatic event. The concern over presenteeism increases during economic recessions because fear of job loss may push employees to come to work when they otherwise would stay home. There are many indirect consequences of presenteeism, including lost productivity, passing the illness to others, increased absenteeism, morale problems, and coworker conflicts. Not feeling well enough to work but still coming to work costs employers billions of dollars each year. Talk to your EAP about presenteeism issues and how they may affect your work group.



Question: An employee appearing drunk at work was tested in accordance with our policy and scored above the legal limit for driving. His supervisor then announced to a group of people in the hallway that the employee was drunk and needed to go home. Is this proper?

Answer: Although the employee appeared drunk to those nearby, a manager's declaration that an employee is drunk and needs to go home is improper. It discloses the results of a positive test, and violates confidentiality and privacy provisions associated with drug testing procedures. Although an employee who tests positive at work should not be at work, an anxious and curious group of coworkers in a hallway should be met with a statement of assurance such as "The matter at hand is being managed properly in accordance with the organization's policy." Nothing more needs to be said. Managers' actions and words model how matters of this type are handled. The supervisor's behavior in this case is neither likely to send a message that dignifies the medical condition of a potentially alcoholic employee nor reduce stigma associated with addictive disease.

Question: Can you provide a range of different issues and factors to consider when I am observing an employee's performance?

Answer: Observing performance can be more complex than most supervisors realize. Proper observing of performance is more than watching how tasks are performed. It also includes many other observation points, each of which tells a piece of the performance story. Consider some or all of these "lookout points" to produce a more complete picture of how your employee is doing: skills, abilities, motivation, quality of work produced, conduct, appearance, vitality (energy level or liveliness), attitude, eagerness to learn, availability, ethical decisions, initiative, safety consciousness, mindfulness of policies and procedures, cooperation with others, and team interaction.

To speak with an EAP professional,
please call: **866.598.3978**

