

SOLUTIONS

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Question: I am a supervisor with high expectations, but could I be called a bully? Is there an officially recognized definition of bullying in the workplace?

Answer: There is no official definition of bullying, although there is an ongoing legal and legislative movement toward establishing one. Most well-honed definitions include a variation of “repeated health-harming mistreatment toward one or more employees by one or more perpetrators that undermines the normal flow of productive work.” This definition of bullying links it to its harmful effect on business. The bottom line is that behavior toward your employees that is persistently troublesome will adversely affect their well-being and work situation. You can be a tough supervisor but still not be a bully. It’s helpful for supervisors to know a few of the common social and psychological issues that influence bullying, such as feelings of incompetence in handling one’s job as a supervisor. Feeling stuck and angry, believing that the organization has overlooked your promotion, is also common to bullying supervisors. In addition, feeling that one’s position is threatened by a highly popular or competent colleague or supervisee can be a precursor to bullying. Personality clashes are also common, and personal problems that add to feelings of insecurity and inadequacy can contribute as well. If you are still not certain if you are a bully, contact your EAP for guidance and be prepared to provide some real-life examples of your supervisory style.

Question: I dislike correcting an employee’s performance and dealing with matters of discipline. I know this is a normal part of a supervisor’s job description, so how do I learn to be less emotionally affected by this part of my job? Can the EAP help me?

Answer: Let’s face it, these types of dialogues are not pleasant and most managers do not enjoy them. If you feel that your performance is substandard because of your inability to manage these discussions successfully, consultative help from the EAP is a smart move. The EAP will provide tips and tactics to help make them go smoother. Learn and practice a basic “model” or structure to a disciplinary (corrective) meeting. The employee assistance professional can play the role of employee. One approach is to state the work standard, describe the unacceptable performance, list the facts, state the acceptable behavior and expectations, listen to the employee, answer the employee’s pertinent questions, and be sure the employee knows and understands what’s needed. Then, wrap it up with an optimistic attitude. Caution: Don’t drag out these meetings in an effort to make them end on a happy note simply to smooth over hard feelings. This can undermine the employee’s urgency to change.



Question: One of our reputable employees was hospitalized and later shared his story of addiction to heroin. I was floored. The employee never showed any symptoms or looked like a street person. There was an absenteeism problem, but I never dreamed it was drugs. Is this rare?

Answer: No, it is not rare. For decades, drug-injecting addicts have been one of the most stigmatized groups in society. Three out of every 100 adults in the U.S. have reported using heroin, according to government research. Many heroin addicts have positions of social responsibility and reputations to protect. These users are a secretive group of addicts, and it is difficult to conduct research with them because of their fear of being discovered. The obscurity of this group explains why people first think of skid row persons or “junkies” when discussing illicit drugs such as heroin. In fact, the majority of heroin users are not on the street. Entry into treatment often follows a crisis of some type associated with the drug’s use. Heroin users are prone to overdose or complications from “bad” heroin they have acquired. Withdrawal can also prompt a bout of unexplained absenteeism.

Question: My employee comes to work every day in a bad frame of mind, seemingly with a chip on his shoulder. How can the EAP counselor help an employee change a bad attitude?

Answer: Your employee’s attitude is a problem for you; however, it is a symptom of what’s troubling him or her. An employee’s attitude, good or bad, is based upon beliefs (past or present) concerning self, others, or the workplace. The goal of employee assistance is to help the employee overcome the attitude problem, and this might include uncovering its source. But there might be no present set of circumstances that give rise to the attitude problem. Have you known someone

with a difficult attitude where it seems like a lifelong personality feature? If so, you may have witnessed how a bad attitude that starts with a rationale behind it can become deeply rooted even if the initial reasoning no longer exists. This personality type can damage productivity, sales, morale, and affect turnover. The EAP can help, but your role in quantifying the problem, insisting on change, and reinforcing an improved attitude will be crucial to a successful effort.

Question: How does a supervisor create performance documentation that does not simply become a piece of paper that represents the supervisor’s word over that of the employee’s?

Answer: Documentation of employee performance is often difficult for a supervisor who does not understand how to separate his or her emotional reaction to the employee’s behavior and who does not include objective notes that clearly support his or her position. Instead, the supervisor unwittingly slips into writing documentation that personally attacks the employee or makes judgments about the employee’s character. Frequently, a supervisor will insist that his or her documentation is accurate and objective, even though it demonstrates the classic misstep of focusing on the employee’s psychological makeup. A powerful technique, but one often omitted from supervisor documentation, is to provide concrete examples of what is being discussed—complaint letters from customers, time cards showing proof of an employee’s lateness, a consultant’s analysis of the employee’s poor productivity. Documenting the employee’s perspective and response to your position is also powerful. If you do so, offer to let the employee sign off on what you have actually written, attesting to its accuracy. Whether the employee signs the statement is not as important as demonstrating that you actually offered the opportunity to do so, which shows you are dedicated to openness and transparency.

Question: How can I know if I am a micromanager? And how can I stop this supervisory practice?

Answer: Micromanaging means “overseeing” the details of work assignments given to your employees. This overseeing is usually done in a meddling manner. Although micromanaging affects employee morale, its disruption to the professional development of employees is perhaps its greatest harm. The goal of the micromanaging supervisor is to have work done correctly and productively, yet the opposite usually occurs because everything must pass through the micromanager. The other consequence of micromanaging is the undermining of employee initiative. Why take initiative when the penalty is aggravation? Most micromanaging supervisors have difficulty with time management and feel uncomfortable with the free time produced by effective delegation. They often don’t understand the difference between delegation and simple assignment of tasks. Experiment with letting go. Read about delegation and its powerful use in supervision. If you still can’t let go, talk to the EAP.

Question: A group of four employees was disciplined because they were found to have participated in harassing behavior toward another worker. Should I refer these employees to the EAP individually or as a group? I think they could benefit as group.

Answer: Refer these employees individually. Be sure to send a written explanation to the EAP about what happened. The rationale for individual meetings is to promote personal responsibility for one’s behavior. Each employee is disciplined individually for what he/she did, not for doing it as part of a group. Although the mind-set of a group can influence individual choices, this does not eliminate

responsibility for making the wrong choice. Also, the EAP will be more effective in working with your employees individually. In a private and confidential setting, each person will respond differently and potentially have different issues to address with the EAP. Group behavior would undermine the purpose of the referral, and the EAP would have a more difficult time confronting the group’s defensiveness. The risk of the problematic behavior recurring would then exist.

Question: My employee moves at a snail’s pace but is a good worker. I think I am seeing depression. I wish I could say that, but I know I can’t. I have known this employee for 20 years. The employee should have more get-up-and-go. How do I encourage an EAP referral?

Answer: Are you witnessing behaviors and performance issues with your employee that can be described and measured? If so, this means you can have a discussion with your employee about correcting them. Don’t worry about what underlies these behaviors. Being able to describe them and judge them as problematic to the work situation is more meaningful to motivation and more important than a diagnostic label. Consider whether you had grown accustomed to your employee’s slow work pace over the years and if some new change or pattern has recently emerged to cause you to focus upon them. Have they become more severe or more frequent? Talk with your employee and discuss your observations of slow performance, a lack of drive, and appearances of being tired. Suggest that the EAP can help in resolving these issues. Don’t rule out a supervisor referral in the future.



Question: I had a good conversation with the EAP about my employee's performance issues prior to making a referral. I then forgot to send the information in writing. The employee didn't cooperate with the EAP. Is it my fault the employee didn't cooperate? Can I refer again?

Answer: It's not your fault that the employee did not cooperate, but because you did not provide the information in writing, the EAP had to repeat secondhand what you shared. When this happens, employees can avoid tough issues and needed changes and minimize the severity of the performance issues they face. Still, it is likely that you will see immediate improvements in your employee's performance, no matter what. Be cautious, this is usually a short-term period of performance improvement prompted by a sense of urgency gained from the experience of being referred to the EAP. Yes, refer again if problems return, but follow your EAP's instructions in providing relevant performance information.

Question: My fellow supervisors and I have never confronted an employee to make a referral for a reasonable suspicion test. Can the EAP meet with us to discuss this issue and offer tips?

Answer: Talk with your EAP about its recommendations for training your group and for discussing how it might want to proceed. The employee assistance professional may want a meeting with you to better understand your issues and needs. He or she will then know how to best meet your needs with informal discussion, role plays, or perhaps an educational presentation on issues associated with making a referral of an employee for testing. Presenting examples of the types of issues you would like to see in a role play would be also be important for making your training experience even more effective.

To speak with an EAP professional,
or for TDD Access, please call:
866.598.3978

