

Frontline Supervisor



■ **An employee complained to me that her supervisor (who reports to me) teases her in front of coworkers and makes disparaging remarks. Much appears to be indirect, oblique, or only insinuation. The supervisor denies such behavior. How can I intervene?**

■ **My employee is new and still probationary. Over a two-day period, she used abusive language, was caught sleeping on the job, and had another employee punch her time card so she could leave early. Would the EAP expect such an employee to be referred rather than fired?**

■ **My employee is sometimes “missing on the job.” He is in the building but he can’t be found. He usually produces some reason that is work related, but difficult**

This supervisor's behavior may constitute verbal or mental cruelty, often referred to as bullying. Unlike a formal definition of harassment that may be linked to discrimination based upon sex, color, race, religion, etc., the subtle but abusive behavior you describe is often more difficult to characterize and confront. If the employee can document the problematic behavior, it can help you get a handle on it. With documentation, consider referring the supervisor to the EAP for assistance in dealing with the issues that contribute to his or her interpersonal relationship problem. Effective documentation would include the context of the bullying behavior, what was said or done, what your employee said or did in response to any unwanted statement or behavior, the supervisor's response to the employee's confrontation of the behavior, and the behavior's effect on her productivity.

The EAP would gladly assist you in trying to salvage your employee regardless of status, but it will not hold out expectations of your referring or terminating the employee. To do so would cross the boundary associated with interfering with management and administrative practices. This could reduce management's reliance on the program and diminish its use by employees. If you are unsure about what to do, evaluating your employee's potential, recent performance, and value to the organization can help you make the best decision. If a period of satisfactory performance has preceded the recent problems, a personal problem may suddenly exist that could be helped by the EAP. On the other hand, it is possible that after a short period of self-control supported by expectations of a new employer, conduct problems frequent with the last employer have emerged with your organization.

For decades, supervisors have been told that employees who are “absent on the job” demonstrate a performance problem often associated with a troubled employee, especially an alcoholic. Presumably some alcoholic employees might hide on the job and drink or sleep off a hangover, but on-the-job absenteeism can be related to many other things. These include medical issues, family problems, distractions the employee finds more

to believe. Is this a sign of an alcoholic employee?

appealing than work, or simply an opportunity to sleep. Employees who disappear on the job usually weigh the risk of getting caught. Such behavior is made more likely by factors such as less supervision, a large work site or plant, or having a private vehicle to perform one's duties. When you discover an employee missing from the job site, ask the employee to account for his or her whereabouts. Put all comments in writing, regardless of whether disciplinary action is taken or not, warn the employee about the consequences of being absent on the job, and make referrals to the EAP.

■ We participated in a critical incident stress debriefing with the EAP after a major accident at work. It was helpful, but one employee is having trouble sleeping. She says she needs a drink or two to sleep at night. Is this normal, and will symptoms go away soon?

People respond differently to critical incident stress. It is normal for recovery periods to vary among victims. However, your employee may be suffering from continuing effects of traumatic stress. Her symptoms could also be related to other issues, but only a professional can make that determination. Using alcohol as a sleep aid typically inhibits healthy recovery from trauma or amplifies effects of traumatic stress. Consider recommending the EAP on a self-referral basis because of her reported distress. If performance suffers, you may need to make a supervisor referral. If you take this step, do not reference her emotional state, the drinking, or the traumatic event as the basis for your supervisor referral. Instead, focus on job performance. The EAP will conduct a full assessment.

■ I want to praise my employees more, but I am not a "touchy-feely" person. My fear, therefore, is that I will sound insincere if I start praising employees. Any tips?

If offering praise feels insincere and you are worried about how it might be perceived, your best bet is to offer it at the moment it is earned. You will appear sincere, and it will feel more natural. Employees may notice that offering praise is a new behavior for you, but they are unlikely to question your sincerity. Don't let feeling self-conscious and vulnerable about offering praise lead you to undermine your attempts at it. For example, if your employee has an excellent month selling widgets, don't say, "great job" and follow it with, "it's about time." Most supervisors miss opportunities to praise employees because they are not thinking about it, or aren't aware of what can be praised. To find more opportunities, be on the lookout for achievements large and small in areas of customer service, speed, efficiency, great results, problem solving, cost savings, new business generated, creativity, initiative, and teamwork.

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