

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource -- Employees

Blue Cross Blue Shield of MN. Employee Assistance Program 651-662-0900 or 1-800-432-5155

■ A significant downsizing has been announced and everyone senses the anxiety and fear. People are shocked. What's the role of the supervisor in this situation—the best way to act? I don't think there's much I can say to make things better. Can the EAP advise me?

There is no prescribed "best way" to act that will guarantee easy management of a downsizing event. Although employees in most companies have similar experiences and feelings when downsizing looms, every work culture is different and requires supervisors to behave in ways that will complement it. Your goal is to help employees face the event but be effective while still employed. Yes, talk to the EAP about how to help employees manage feelings of shock, fear, and uncertainty. Also follow guidelines your organization has established and know how it wants you to support employees. Let employees know you are available to talk. You won't counsel them. That's a job for the EAP. But you can still let them vent. Don't cover up your own shock and concern. If it's genuine, employees will feel free to experience concern but still be able to function, too. Don't plan on saying something profound that will magically make all the hard feelings and fear go away. And don't rule out having the EAP moderate a support group to help process the feelings shared among those employees who wish to participate. Discuss This option with the EAP before announcing it.

■ Do bullied employees need counseling to help them cope more assertively, or is this strictly a zero-tolerance issue requiring a swift response whenever it's discovered, like sexual harassment is? Is bullying a widespread problem?

Bullied employees may or may not benefit from assertiveness training, but such a need is separate from the problem an organization faces with a bullying employee. Bullying should be viewed as a health and safety issue—as real as bad brakes on a delivery truck or a loose handrail on a company staircase. Bullying has known health consequences, including anxiety, depression, and even post-traumatic stress disorder. People, especially young people, have committed suicide because of bullying. The EAP has an intervention role to play in helping employees affected by bullying or in helping employees to stop their harmful relationship patterns when they are identified by management. You can anticipate hearing and reading more about bullying. It is a concern not just in the U.S. but in modern workplaces worldwide.

■ How can supervisors communicate more effectively to help improve job performance issues?

One key way to help employees improve job performance is by tailoring your communication to match their motivational triggers. Employees are motivated by either intrinsic values like goal achievement, doing a job well, or garnering recognition, or by extrinsic values based on conditions reflected by such statements as "If I don't do my job well, I may not get a raise" or "If I don't perform well, others will complain." A combination of these factors often motivates employees, but a predominant style can usually be identified. Take time to learn what motivates your employees and you'll improve your communication in ways that will increase their productivity. When communicating with employees, be sure to describe what changes you expect so that employees know what you want. Some employees need visual communication—a written note from you or a diagram, for example. Others need more discussion and verbal processing to grasp the results you want from them. And the simplest rule of all: ask your employees what works best for them in communication. They'll tell you.

■ Following a supervisor referral, I received a phone call informing me that my employee refused the EAP's recommendations. I don't know what they are, but still, I think the refusal is foolish. Should I tell the employee what I think? Performance is fine, for the moment, at least.

You should continue to focus on your employee's job performance. Provide support and feedback on the changes he or she makes. Identify improvements that are still needed. Refusing the EAP's recommendation may not be a good idea, but you are not able to make this determination absolutely. The employee may be genuinely concerned about the personal problem but simply not agree with the EAP's recommendation for resolving it. True, professional skill in EAP assessments leads effective referrals for employees, but ultimately the employee must decide that the recommendation fits. Sometimes employees refuse recommendations because they are absolutely certain that less painful routes to the resolution of their problems exist. This is particularly true with alcoholic employees. Abstinence and admission to treatment feel simply too extreme. Your role as supervisor is now critical, because a serious personal problem may only be treated with precisely what the EAP has recommended. The supervisor's focus on performance and insistence that changes are permanently forthcoming may be the only way the employee is eventually led to accept what the EAP is offering.

■ I have an employee who I suspect has a low IQ. It is almost impossible to discuss unsatisfactory performance and anticipate corrections. It makes no sense to impose a disciplinary action, and "warnings" don't work. Can the EAP help? I don't see how.

If your employee is not performing satisfactorily and your efforts to correct performance have not worked to bring about improvement, make a referral to the EAP. Trying to determine the personal problems or to explain them by way of a low IQ can lead you to question whether an EAP referral would be of any value. Even if your employee has special challenges with mental retardation, other factors may contribute to the struggles he or she faces. The EAP will attempt to identify those issues, and if a decision for dismissal is ever considered, you can then document that every opportunity was afforded to your employee.

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