

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

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

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■ I am a skeptic who believes that alcoholics can't learn to quit drinking. Aren't success rates from treatment programs overblown? My father drank until his last days, and there were a lot of incidents that should have motivated him to quit.

Your experience underlies your belief that alcoholics can't be treated successfully, but in fact, successful treatment is common. There are millions of treated, abstinent, recovering persons. An impressive demonstration of alcoholism's treatability is the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration's management of more than 1,500 alcoholic airline pilots over the past thirty years. The vast majority have been successful in treatment, which means they completely abstain from substance use. The program has been independently studied and found to have an 85% success rate. The key is rigorous follow-up and support for the participants. Once a pilot is treated, the program permits a return to the job after abstinence and participation in recovery for a defined period of time. As with most chronic illnesses, relapses sometimes occur. Participating pilots aren't necessarily terminated but are evaluated to determine whether they can reestablish their recovery programs.

■ My employee has adult attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). I know this because the employee told me. Unfortunately, his symptoms are very evident. He has a doctor, but if he is taking medication, it's not having much effect. Can the EAP help?

Make a supervisor referral to the EAP based upon the performance issues you have documented. Take your focus off the ADHD diagnosis. With this approach you will see faster improvement because the EAP can address the reasons underlying the problems you're witnessing. Adult ADHD is not simply a medication issue. There are two important components of ADHD: the condition itself and the psychological impact of the person's failed attempts to adjust and compensate for symptoms. Both of these issues must be addressed by treatment professionals. Stress, substance abuse, poor self-esteem, and depression can all be indirectly associated with ADHD. Procrastination, for example, a possible symptom of ADHD may contribute to a host of personal problems. These problems could lead to still more problems associated with family and relationship issues. As you can see, there is a lot for the EAP to explore.

■ Holiday party invitations from employees are being distributed, and my fellow managers and I are discussing whether we should attend the events. Some of these employees have pretty rowdy parties. Others are very low key. Do you have any advice for managers regarding socializing with subordinates at such events?

Your concern indicates that you should perhaps decline attending some of these events. Many supervisors do not understand the importance of their reputations and the significance of the influence they wield. These are vital tools of enormous benefit to productivity. In a real sense, they are "assets" paid for by the employer, sometimes over many years. They can be undermined easily and permanently through a phenomenon known as "familiarity" with employees. When you join with employees so they get to know the "real you" at "let-your-hair-down" events, you jeopardize rather than enhance the effectiveness of your relationship with them unless there are exterior controls in place (organized off-site team-building events, etc.). It is usually naive to believe the opposite is true. The most important relationship that you have with your employees is the one that serves your employer best. Use this as a reference point when deciding whether to attend a social event. You will develop good instincts for which ones to avoid.

■ I have many young employees working for me. Most are in their middle or late teens. They are loud and defensive when confronted. Going to an EAP to address personal problems is probably never going to happen, right? What advice can you offer supervisors with employees in this age group?

Do not underestimate the willingness of the most stubborn teen employee to seek help from the EAP. Your belief is the only roadblock standing in the way. An informal recommendation to use the EAP may go unheeded, but performance problems will eventually force the threat of job loss if you are determined to put a stop to them. Motivated teens are no different from any other employees in wanting to preserve employment. Most will take their chances at the EAP before suffering job loss. Like adults, most have at least a fuzzy understanding of what behaviors contribute to their problems. Defensiveness and a tendency to project or place blame on others is characteristic for their age group, but don't let this fool you into thinking they can't be motivated to seek help for their own benefit.

■ Some of the employees I supervise are struggling financially. My building trades staff (painters, carpenters, etc.) could benefit from side jobs like fixing my house, painting, or gardening work. Is offering personal work a problem as long as I keep it "strictly business"?

Don't do it. Although it is tempting to have your employees perform tasks at your home, there are many landmines associated with this common supervisor blooper. Your motivation is to get work done at your house despite your stated interest in helping them. That is where you will place your priority in the different relationship that will exist outside the workplace. But this is only the beginning of the conflict-of-interest problems. Your switching roles between supervisor and employer can easily affect your performance management decisions and it will taint the decisions employees make on the job. Ultimately your employer is the one at risk because both you and your employees are placed in a situation where they are motivated to act in a way that is no longer impartial—the essence of a conflict-of-interest relationship.

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