

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



■ **Can the EAO provide me with more information about the personal nature of my employee's personal problems if he or she signs a release?**

A release of confidentiality signed by an EAO client typically allows a limited amount of information to be disclosed. This could include confirmation of EAO attendance or whether a recommendation was made by the EAO but not its nature. Technically, a release could allow the EAO to provide personal information, but this would be strongly discouraged for several reasons. The over-disclosure of information risks the loss of confidentiality and the loss of the perception of confidentiality associated with the EAO. Also, personal information disclosed to the supervisor would invite supervisor involvement in the employee's problems, and it could unnecessarily interfere with administrative or disciplinary matters. This could frustrate management, confound managerial decision making, and lead to decreased enthusiasm for the EAO by management and the employee.

■ **Why are symptoms of alcoholism and drug addiction so different among employees? The most dramatic variance I have seen in my career is the issue of tardiness and absenteeism—some had a lot, others had none.**

The behavioral signs and symptoms of alcoholism or drug addiction usually appear where they are least likely to create undesired consequences for the alcoholic or drug user, at least in the early stages of the illness. This is a time when the addict can exert more control. As the illness grows worse, this control lessens and more unpredictable behavioral patterns result. In a job where failure to come to work on time could lead to immediate dismissal, on-time attendance is more likely. If a manager appears to be lenient with regard to attendance and on-time appearance, then attendance issues are likely to be more prevalent. Indeed, most employees pay close attention to the degree to which on-time arrival to work is required, and what consequences ensue for coming in late or failing to show. Note that many personal problems impact attendance. You will, therefore, see a great degree of variance among employees with regard to this performance standard.

■ **Must everything we do as supervisors fall under the heading of “being a role model?” Personally, I think it is good to loosen up every once in a while so that employees see we are real people who can have a good time.**

It may not seem fair, but your employees are continuously judging you by your behaviors. By virtue of your position, every behavior you exhibit to employees is viewed in the context of you as a role model. This is an inescapable dynamic of workplace authority and supervision. But there is more to it. All behaviors of supervisors make an impression on employees because their behaviors are symbolic. They tell your employees what you value, what you support, and what you stand for. This is a powerful tool in leadership. Not understanding this dynamic can cause you to lose their respect, along with harming your ability to influence and shape a team. Unfortunately, this easily happens when supervisors feel uncomfortable with this power or believe that being “one of the guys (or gals)” is more important.

■ **I sometimes wonder about employees’ personality problems when they exhibit difficult behavior. For example, I think one of my employees is a narcissist. Isn’t it a good idea for the EAO to offer advice on how to communicate with different types of personalities?**

Longstanding EAO guidance on avoiding diagnostic thinking on the part of supervisors has wide-ranging importance in the management of performance. A key issue is reducing the lag time for referring an employee to the EAO. Anything that impedes this process increases risk to the organization. Engaging with difficult personalities with the goal of overcoming their personality traits or “out-psychoing” them contributes to this delay. Many people have elements of their personality that fall within descriptions of personality disorders. There is no clear path on how to engage with personality disorders. A better way to go is to consult with the EAO about individual employees and your concerns about their work, behavior, attitude, or attendance. Then follow an effective approach for helping them become the best workers they can be. That might include help from the EAO.

■ **I am unsure how to respond to some problems raised by employees to explain their performance issues. For example, I have an employee with a tardiness problem who blames the traffic. I spend precious time advising on these issues, but to no avail. Does an EAO referral make sense?**

It is easy to get bogged down in helping employees troubleshoot problems like traffic or babysitting quandaries in an effort to have them perform, or in this case, arrive on time. This is all natural and quite expected in close working relationships. However, such discussions can grow wider and deeper. Eventually, you may not consider the EAO as an option. Here’s where it gets interesting: If you have spent a large amount of time troubleshooting a problem like traffic, you may not realize that other problems may contribute to the tardiness. These other problems may actually be the primary cause. Still, you may believe the EAO can’t help because, after all, this is about traffic. Any Employee Assistance office could cite dozens of primary contributing factors to tardiness of which supervisors were completely unaware. Best advice is to refer the employee to the EAO, and if attendance does not improve, address through performance management.