

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



■ **Many employees are taking care of elderly parents while managing their households and parenting their own children. I think some of these workers are at risk for burnout, or at least for being unproductive at some point. How can managers play a role in helping these workers?**

■ **In a few cases when I have referred employees to the EAO, they've refused to go after I've mentioned that I need them to sign a release of information. It's a catch-22. I need to know if they actually go, but asking for a release loses the referral. What's the fix?**

■ **My employee fell off the loading dock and was injured while involved in horseplay. A gesture from a coworker indicated he had been smoking pot on lunch break. I have no evidence, but how can I make an EAP referral to evaluate whether a drug use issue exists?**

Compassion fatigue describes the type of burnout often experienced by caregivers. Additionally, the “Sandwich Generation” describes those adults faced with responsibilities for their children while also ministering to the needs of elderly parent(s). Like nurses who may experience burnout that contributes to less-effective patient care, absenteeism, and employee turnover, your employees may pose similar risks. Realize that caregivers may not notice the level of stress they are truly under until symptoms like health problems appear. For burnout, these could include dozens of maladies and complaints—headaches, lowered resiliency, interpersonal conflicts, cynicism, irritability, low energy, more frequent colds, or blaming the employer for not appreciating his or her contributions. It can be a highly mixed bag of issues. When you witness productivity drop-offs among employees, refer early to the EAO. Scheduling flexibility may offer valuable help for employee caregivers, and it can be difficult to know where to draw the line. Remember the EAO can be a good resource for managers too.

Although an employee must sign a release of information if you are to learn of his or her participation in the EAO, you admittedly are not equipped to explain confidentiality laws, the purpose of a release, its restrictions, and why it is a good idea. The solution is to say, “Can you please give permission to the EAO to let me know that you kept the appointment?” This approach is less threatening. It also better protects the perception of the EAO confidentiality. EA professionals are experienced at explaining the purpose of a release so employees see its value as a way for the EAP to effectively communicate appropriate information to the supervisor. This reduces anxiety, which keeps clients focused on getting help.

There may be occasions when a supervisor would like to refer an employee to the EAO for a personal problem based on a hunch or unverified tip. Without clear documentation of a performance issue or a clear rationale for the referral, however, such action would only hurt the EAO by decreasing its value as a program of attraction. Some employers refer employees to the EAO for help with coming back to work after an injury, or when a conduct problem has repeated itself too often.

A workers' compensation doctor might spot a drug use issue in the course of treatment and refer to the EAO. However, beyond these few paths of discovery, the ability to refer is limited. Note that EAO consultants always keep in mind the possibility that an alcohol or drug problem exists within the context of any type of initial complaint. The EAO field's beginning is rooted in this underlying principle.

Beyond respect and tolerance, how can I help employees see the value of diversity and use it as a resource to support work goals and the organization's mission?

Your question relates to the business case for diversity. Modeling the behaviors you want employees to follow is the way to accomplish your goal. Demonstrate inclusiveness when formulating teams and delegating assignments to communicate that everyone within the work unit has value. Believe that a diverse group of workers has the potential to find better solutions to problems to show how diversity can be a tool for increased productivity. When someone not of the dominant group expresses an idea, ask lots of questions to show how learning and discovery are enabled by diversity. Spot ways in which diversity is not yet fully utilized in your work unit and seek ways to make it happen. Don't be a bystander to inappropriate comments associated with diversity. Challenge statements that undermine inclusiveness and respect. Be mindful of your own biases, and avoid statements that generalize characteristics to specific groups of employees.

I am a new manager and in my first job as a supervisor. What problems might I encounter early that I can prepare for now? If I feel overwhelmed, can the EAO help me?

Becoming a manager can be exciting, but be sure you understand your role and responsibilities. Have this discussion and nail down the details early. This will prevent many problems you would otherwise face from overlooking important aspects of your job. Be prepared for difficult challenges that lead you to question your ability to do the job. This is normal. If your employees are performing well, do not see this as a signal to ignore them until they need you. Be proactive and engage with them regularly. The supervisory role includes influence projected by your knowledge and abilities, and leverage naturally linked to your authority. Both dynamics influence employee productivity. The EAO can help you with time and stress management; tips on organizing work; consulting on how to manage difficult employees and how to coach; education on conflict resolution and managing teams; support when faced with tough decisions like terminating an employee; and, counseling to help you avoid burnout.

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