

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



Employee Assistance Office (EAO) – 608-263-2987 – www.eao.wisc.edu

■ We have an employee who comes to work late, and it causes problems for everyone. What's got me stumped is why this person is not confronted by peers. The employee is likeable, and we all know about his heavy drinking, but why this enabling?

If your employee had no alcohol problem, ironically, he might be confronted more readily by peers. Assuming employees believe the lateness is explained by alcoholism, they may feel unable to be assertive and confront the behavior. Here's why: Alcoholism still suffers from enormous myths and misconceptions. For most of history, alcoholism has been wrongly identified as a personality disorder or the result of moral or psychological weakness. These views remain, and almost everyone is familiar with them, if not consciously, then unconsciously. Alcoholism is a disease; these prior descriptions do not fit the facts as we know them today. Still, these pervasive misconceptions turn alcoholism into an accusation. This is what makes people back off. Because the lateness is believed to be associated with alcoholism, and employees are reticent to make an accusation, they remain silent hoping for change someday.

■ When documenting performance problems of troubled employees, what critical factors are important to bear in mind so the documentation is effective when given to an employee in a corrective letter or used later in an administrative action?

Most troubled employees are frustrated and defensive because of their inability to self-treat or resolve a personal problem. This leads them not only to practice denial and react adversely to confrontations but also to read a corrective letter or warning notice with an eye toward finding any part of it that could be viewed as inaccurate, untrue, or exaggerated. These parts of the corrective letter will get the most attention. Documentation must be accurate and detailed; it is suggested that your Human Resource Manager be contacted for support on writing a letter of this nature. For additional insight on this employee's behavior, consider contacting the EAO for consultative help.

■ What are the most common explanations for why supervisors do not refer troubled employees to the EAO?

Sometimes the EAO is under promoted and supervisors avoid referring a troubled employee. These reasons include: not knowing EAO is an option; 'diagnosing' employees themselves (believing they know what the problem is and that the EAO is not the right solution); concern that this option would offer a safe harbor for the employee to escape poor performance. *EAO policy states that employees cannot use the EAO to excuse poor performance.*

An additional factor for non-referral is confusion on the part of the supervisor who witnesses a dramatic cycle of poor performance or attendance problems interspersed with periods of exceptional or satisfactory performance. The pattern is enough to postpone the referral of an employee for years, even decades.

■ **How can I help employees be less territorial and more open to others' ideas, perspectives, and suggestions when they need to work together as a team?**

Employee cooperation in a team environment requires a work culture that is maintained and nurtured so that cooperation becomes a tradition. Without this supportive environment, teams fracture and individuals become competitive. Conflicts ensue, cliques emerge, and productivity suffers. Symptoms of this fracturing include poor information sharing, lack of mutual help in solving problems, poor communication, and vying for credit. The good news is that humans have innate skills to work in teams. Discover what reinforces lack of cooperation and undermines team thinking. Consider giving everyone a refresher on how teams work and their value. Hold discussions to process specific issues or roadblocks to the team's effectiveness. Next, add practical exercises designed to build more trust. Be sure to set expectations, and ask the EAO for possible resources with regard to your effort. Make sure teams meet, and reward both team cooperation and individual participation going forward.

■ **I know supervisors should not be discussing personal problems with employees and instead should refer to the EAO. I don't wish to interfere with employees seeking help, but how do I manage becoming a supervisor who no longer listens when I've always played this role?**

You can still be a warm and approachable supervisor who listens. In fact, nothing could be more helpful to the EAO, because you are trusted by employees and in an ideal position to facilitate their self-referral. The important issue is to avoid the counseling role. Crossing this line impedes employee motivation to seek proper help from the EAO. It also dissipates a feeling of urgency needed to hurdle the resistance most employees face in their decision to get professional help. Listen and be encouraging and supportive, but make the EAO the trusted source of help for the complete answer or solution to their troubles.