

Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



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

■ **I manage my employees' performance problems by doing everything I can to help them improve. If that fails, I refer them to the EAO. Sometimes they are willing to attend, and sometimes not. Is this a proper use of the EAO?**

You are using the EAO properly to address performance issues, but using it sooner rather than later has advantages you should consider. Don't see the EAO as a last resort or final step. A recommendation by the supervisor to the EAO only after other approaches have failed can be resisted by troubled employees. This dynamic can lead the employee to shrug off the recommendation. At that point, disciplinary action held in abeyance with the option of EAO attendance and cooperation may be the only way to succeed. Try to avoid reaching this stage. You risk turnover and loss of the worker, which is a pricey outcome if the employee is highly skilled. If the EAO is suggested at the first sign of deteriorating performance, you will have more personal influence and less resistance than if a formal referral becomes necessary.

■ **I have an employee whose co-workers complain about his performance on a regular basis. Can you suggest ways to facilitate improvements that I may not have considered before I recommend the EAO? Note that we are very stressed and under-resourced.**

Your team gives you an advantage for helping your employee improve performance. First, review the workload. Some employees in resource-stressed organizations fool themselves into thinking they can manage heavy workloads and take whatever is thrown their way without asking for help. Make sure the workload is balanced among team members. Are you rotating assignments among them? If not, cross-train, and exchange duties; then gauge what happens. Some employees excel at one type of work more than another. Rotate assignments; this employee may surprise you by demonstrating a range of skills. Don't pigeonhole the employee because you assume he or she has just one narrow area of expertise. Also, try pairing up teammates. Ask an outstanding team member to mentor a poor performer for a few weeks. This is a practical way to evaluate skill deficits and problems. If you are not ready to refer your employee, consult with the EAO during this evaluation period. You'll gain insight and be better prepared to refer the employee to the EAO when that becomes necessary.

■ **How do I know whether an employee's behavior reflects mental illness to the point of requiring a psychiatrist or professional counselor? And should I refer to the EAO first or seek a fitness-for-duty evaluation?**

You will not be able to make a determination of mental illness in your official capacity as a supervisor. Getting too focused on whether your employee is mentally ill will lead to a delay in taking appropriate action. In an extreme situation, this could create a hazard for others. If you witness unsafe behavior that interferes with the workplace or jeopardizes a safe work environment, or if you see behavior that in your judgment indicates the employee is unable to perform essential duties safely, then follow your organization's guidance provided by your human resources representative.

An EAO referral may also be appropriate in tandem with this step, but safety issues take priority over the success of an EAO referral, which can come later.

■ **I have two employees who are in continuous conflict. I'm fed up with lecturing them, so I am making a formal supervisor referral. Should I meet with them together and refer them to the EAO as a pair, or should I meet with them separately and refer them individually?**

Meet with your employees together, and refer each individually to the EAO. There may come a point in time when the EAO recommends they meet together in a session, but beginning this process with separate appointments and assessments will make subsequent meetings more productive and resolving differences more likely. The reverse of this process is cumbersome for the EAO, because it creates a disadvantage by affording less insight into the dynamics and real issues. When co-workers are in conflict, visible and not-so-visible issues exist that fuel the conflict. These may be personal, psychological, or even outside the awareness of one or both parties and cannot be easily identified without a confidential, individual interview. This will allow the EAO time to examine each employee's view of the conflict, what caused it, why it has been allowed to continue, and how it may be resolved.

■ **What's the most significant problem in the workplace that inhibits productivity, causes conflicts between workers and managers, and creates the most risk for employees and the organization?**

The answer is poor workplace communication. Because nothing happens without communication, and because every dimension of an organization's mission depends on communication, it will always be the single most important influencer of productivity or lack of it. We are not talking about just sending and receiving messages. There is no end to getting communication right, but here's a hint: Think "barriers." There are many types of barriers that affect every possible type of workplace communication. For an example of how veiled these barriers can be in one area alone, consider new hires. Upon hiring new workers, you should always provide a performance plan that describes the most important duties in detail and how they should be completed. It sounds simple, but EAOs commonly receive this complaint from employees: "I don't know what they want me to do." Or, "No one has given me a job description." Imagine the conflict, misunderstanding, anger, and productivity issues that this communication barrier creates.