

FRONTLINE

A newsletter from the WA State Employee Assistance Program

Questions



An employee seems unusually tired lately. She says she has trouble sleeping. Can an EAP referral help her, or are sleeping problems a medical issue? I could simply recommend she speak with her doctor. There's nothing wrong with that, right?



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

Answers



Your employee says she is not sleeping, but to say it is a “sleeping problem” with a medical solution is a diagnostic conclusion. Sleeping problems could be caused by many things such as financial trouble, relationship issues, child rearing, even drug or alcohol use. Telling someone to see a doctor for a healthcare problem sounds like a no-brainer, but in the workplace you must consider other factors and your role. This makes the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) your best bet. From this gateway, the employee can access all options. For a simple case of insomnia, the EAP might probe to determine the cause, and suggest practical steps that promote better sleep. For more complex sleep problems—from anxiety disorders to nagging physical pain to disrupted circadian rhythm patterns—the EAP can provide a referral to the appropriate health expert. The EAP will also help distinguish between physiological and psychological factors that disturb sleep.



Where EAPs are underpromoted, the most common explanations for why supervisors do not refer troubled employees include not thinking of it or not knowing they can. Where EAPs are well promoted, reasons include thinking they wouldn't be effective “in this case” or believing the program would be a “safe harbor” to protect the employee from administrative action. Remembering to use the EAP is aided by regular communication (such as a newsletter). Believing the program wouldn't work is common among those supervisors who “diagnose” their employees, believing they know what problem ails the employee, and think the EAP is not the right solution. The safe harbor is a misconception. EAP policies state that employees can't use an EAP to excuse poor performance or to find refuge from the consequences of ongoing performance problems. Another common explanation 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.

Frontline Supervisor

Questions



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?



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?



I know supervisors should not be discussing personal problems with employees and instead should refer to

the EAP. 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?

Answers



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. This means your documentation must be accurate, detailed, and written with the understanding that your employee will seek to find fault with it. The most problematic corrective memos omit specifics, use subjective language, focus on employee personality issues, or use psychological terms that refer to the personality of the employee rather than the behavior. Use the consultative help of your EAP to gain insight on how to avoid these documentation missteps.



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 in 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 EAP for possible resources with regard to your effort. Make sure teams meet, and reward both team cooperation and individual participation going forward.



You can still be a warm and approachable supervisor who listens. In fact, nothing could be more helpful to the EAP, because you are trusted by employees and in an ideal position to facilitate their self-referral. The important issue

is avoiding the counseling role. Crossing this line impedes employee motivation to seek proper help from the EAP. 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 EAP the trusted source of help for the complete answer or solution to their troubles.