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Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor



■ **My employee had severe performance issues eight or nine years ago. We almost terminated him, but he was referred to the EAP and entered treatment for alcoholism. Things have been great, but unfortunately, I was told he was drinking at a holiday party recently. Should I be concerned?**

You are reporting that your employee's performance is acceptable and that you have no concerns after so many years. Nevertheless, it appears he has relapsed. You should monitor his performance as you always have, and if problems return, engage the EAP and follow the supervisor referral process recommended to you. There is no other action for you to take unless an active follow-up program is continuing with the EAP. It would then be appropriate to inform the EAP. Performance and ability to perform the position's essential functions are the dominant concerns of the employer. Failure by your employee to manage his disease properly is a personal and medical concern for the moment. It is possible that the relapse will not affect his performance again, or problems could return in a spectacular fashion. Your vigilance as a supervisor will help you intervene early if needed to protect the investment you have in this worker.

■ **I think my employee is sleeping in his car. He has a daily disheveled appearance—as if he has slept in his clothes. His performance is fine, but should I ask what's going on? If he says yes, [he is sleeping in his car,] I will refer him to the EAP, but what's my performance justification?**

Speak to your employee in private to inquire about this situation. Employees are your most valuable resource. Their safety is paramount, and your concern stems from this principle. Your suspicion is based on what you can see is a disheveled appearance, so you have enough to justify your concern. Sleeping in a car can be dangerous for many reasons, but it's important to help your employee feel comfortable enough to visit the EAP for help and assistance. According to one survey, one out of ten employees has experienced homelessness due to a wide variety of financial problems. Although there have been tales of medical students voluntarily sleeping in vehicles as a way of coping with debt to get through medical school, it is more likely that real problems exist with your employee and require intervention and assistance from a source of help such as the EAP.

■ **I was reprimanded for telling my employee who is 69 that he looked really good for his age. I was told this was an example of ageism. I don't see how.**

The workplace is not a social setting like a backyard barbecue. It is a place of employment and governed by federal and state laws. Many of these laws apply to different types of employment discrimination, with age being one of them. While such a statement might be interpreted as a compliment in a private social setting, it has potential risk for your employer. Regardless of intent, your statement could be construed to mean

I've been in many social situations where a statement like this is flattering and a compliment. What's the problem?

that the employer prefers employees who appear younger than their biologic age. You may not have considered your compliment as potentially problematic, but this does not mean it couldn't be used against you later to substantiate a hiring discrimination claim. Ageism is taking on greater importance in the workplace as employees work longer careers and the workforce as a whole grows older. Most claims against employers regarding ageism will naturally center on recruitment, promotion, and decisions associated with termination and downsizing.

■ What role should supervisors play in helping employees deal with their emotions and cope with stress? I don't want to take a "hands-off, not my problem" approach, nor do I want to refer everyone to the EAP for everyday stress issues.

Today's workplace has changed. Employees are much more desirous of positive, nurturing, and socially connected environments. This is especially true of younger workers, who also appreciate supervisors who are willing to be more vulnerable and open about their feelings with them. Given these new expectations and to help retain employees longer, offering guidance on coping with work stress is appropriate for supervisors. This can include, for example, counseling employees about taking risks, managing fear and work stress, coping with mistakes, not regretting missed opportunities, and overcoming fear of taking chances, as well as supervisors sharing information about their personal failures and successes. These things help employees build "emotional resilience" to better cope with errors, mistakes, work crises, coworker conflicts, disappointments, missed promotions, upsetting performance reviews, and more. All organizations want lower turnover, and helping employees build emotional resilience clearly has a business rationale. Caution: Do separate the above skills from acute issues and the need for professional counseling suitable for the EAP.

■ Is it appropriate to refer an employee with a chronic desk clutter problem and cluttered workspace to the EAP?

It is reasonable for supervisors to request that employees keep a clutter-free desk and workspace, because it has negative impacts on productivity. Desk clutter is not always because of a personal habit or difficulty with procrastination in getting things straightened up. It can also be a symptom of other personal problems or psychological issues. Manage an employee's inability to declutter like any other performance issue. Ask, request, encourage, or insist. However, if there is a lack of results, refer the employee to the EAP. Plenty of research exists on clutter, its adverse impact on productivity, and the cost to the bottom line in organizations.

Source: www.paw.princeton.edu [Search "clutter research"]

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