

# Frontline Supervisor



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

**Your employee says** she is not sleeping, but to say it is a “sleeping problem” with a medical solution is a diagnostic conclusion better left to the EAP, following an interview with your employee. Sleeping problems could be caused by many things—even drug or alcohol use. Telling someone to see a doctor for a healthcare problem sounds like a no-brainer. However, in the workplace you must consider other factors and your role. This makes the 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 deep 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 distinguish between physiological and psychological factors that disturb sleep.

■ **I'm impressed by the improvement in a worker's personality since he started going to the EAP. His peers marvel at how he's changed, too. I'd like to tell them it's due to the EAP. Should I ask for his permission to disclose that?**

**No. There is no need** for you to seek testimonials to convince people to use the EAP. If your worker is pleased with his progress, he may choose to tell others about his positive EAP experience. Even if he doesn't, there are better ways to introduce your staff to the benefits of the EAP, than by advertising the success stories of satisfied employees. The very act of asking for his permission to disclose his EAP involvement can create tension, in light of the need for confidentiality. He may readily agree to your request. However, others who are considering contacting the EAP may hesitate, if they worry that you will later expect them to publicly share their experience. Therefore, your well-intentioned action can have the unintended consequence of dissuading people who need the EAP from using it. Moreover, that can exacerbate problems in your department as employees' serious issues go untreated.

■ **A local psychologist visited our work unit and spoke on motivation and goal setting. He did a great job, but several employees are now patients in his**

**Obviously your employees** were impressed enough to take advantage of this psychologist's services, but it would have been improper for you to discourage their self-referral to his private practice outside work. The psychologist's practice does not interfere with the EAP because the EAP is not a psychotherapy provider. Any pursuit of improved mental health is a good thing, but you should remember that mental health professionals from the community, visiting with your employees, might

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**psychotherapy practice. Should I have discouraged them, and instead referred them to the EAP?**

have secondary goals of promoting their services. They may not act as objective referral agents and send employees to the best source of help for themselves, but instead refer them to their private practice. Employee assistance professionals also speak to work groups on various topics such as motivation and goal setting. They can identify speakers for you who will present to your group, but with the expectation of not promoting their services while doing so.

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**■ I want employees to see the EAP as an ongoing resource even if they don't have serious problems. What's the best way to pitch it to them as a sounding board that everyone can use?**

**At every opportunity**, present the EAP as a valuable benefit for all employees. Emphasize the positive role it plays in helping people enhance their lives—from gaining a better work-life balance, to improving personal efficiency, to assisting with career advancement. When employees view the EAP as a source of information, insight, and support, they will use it even if they never need to fight battles that threaten their well-being. Given the growing interest in health and wellness, you can present the EAP as a partner in helping people reduce stress and make smart personal care choices. To persuade employees to seek out the EAP, ask questions that guide their decision-making such as, “Do you think you’d find it beneficial to get input from a caring, knowledgeable source?” That’s better than making “should” statements such as, “I think you should use the EAP.”

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**■ Another supervisor told me that one of my best employees frequently bullies coworkers when I'm not around. My employee is so gentle. I find it hard to believe he's a bully. Should I investigate or ignore this?**

**Ignoring this situation** poses risks. If your employee engages in bullying behavior, it can harm morale and undermine team performance. Even worse, other employees may lose faith in your leadership if they think you’ve been duped into believing that this individual is gentle. This can breed cynicism and weaken your authority. Most supervisors eventually learn that when it comes to employees, appearances can deceive. A seemingly kind, thoughtful worker can come across as a demon to others. Investigate the matter by meeting privately with the employee—and then his coworkers—to gather information. Also, observe how this person interacts with his colleagues and look for evidence of intimidation or discord. You may want to visit the EAP to learn about the nature of bullying in the workplace and how to manage it.

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**NOTES**



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800.327.2723 or 508.990.0777***

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■ **I want to be a good leader and I admire some of the supervisors in our organization because they are charismatic. Is this a learned leadership style? Can anyone become charismatic, or is a charismatic leader "born that way"?**

**Many studies have been** done on charisma, but few have been able to pin down precisely what causes someone to have it. Most of us know someone who is charismatic or we know what it feels like when we meet such a person. It is clear that charismatic individuals possess a combination of powerful and complex personality traits that produce a magnetic and uncanny ability to charm or influence others. The debate is still on about whether charisma can be taught. More important than acquiring charisma is learning to lead others. That can be taught. The easiest way to begin is to study the differences between managers who are considered "leaders" and those who are not. You will discover that good leaders have skills that many charismatic persons are thought to possess, including the ability to inspire trust, be creative, see over the horizon, be unique, think in the long term, originate ideas, and help their organizations reach the next level by constructively challenging the status quo.

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■ **If an employee had an alcohol problem, I think I would know it. That is why I am so surprised that one of my employees was admitted to a detox unit over the weekend. This employee never drinks at work, and his performance is fine. I'm stumped.**

**Many employees with** severe alcohol problems may not drink on the job. Instead, they drink after work, on weekends, or in the mornings prior to work, or they experience binges you will never witness. Family members do witness such events, however, and a crisis at home may have led to the admission of your employee in this case. Perhaps DUI led to the crisis. Your employee could have perfectly acceptable performance at work, yet still have domestic problems caused by alcoholism. Like most people, you understand alcoholism from a limited point of view, because misconception and misinformation about the disease is pervasive. It is easy to decide that anyone who does not fit into that view is without a problem. Don't respond to your employee with disbelief upon his return. Instead, respond with support.

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■ **I referred an employee to the EAP and she seemed perfectly happy to go. However, I have learned that she never went. I didn't ask why, because her**

**Any of these steps may** facilitate your employee's following through with a supervisor's referral to the EAP. All have been tried with various EAPs, and all have worked. Speak to the EAP if you have questions about any of them. 1) Reassure the employee that the program is confidential. 2) Say you won't discuss the referral with anyone in the work setting. 3) Assure the employee of confidentiality. 4) Mention the name of the EA professional with whom you spoke to discuss performance

**performance is fine now, but what could I have done, if anything, to make the employee more likely to follow through on my referral?**

**■ I have to confess, I have not done a performance appraisal with my employees in a couple of years. I have had no complaints, and employees are doing well. With so much to do, I just keep postponing it. It's like exercise: I know I should do it, but I don't. What am I risking?**

**■ It's been said that the EAP can be an alternative to discipline but not a substitute for it. This sounds like the same thing to me. Can you explain?**

and say that he or she is expecting a call from the employee. 5) Provide the phone number of the EAP. 6) Have a tentative appointment you have arranged in cooperation with the EAP, and if the employee accepts the referral, offer it as one option or cancel it. 7) Allow the employee to visit the first EAP assessment on paid time.

**Most supervisors know** that performance appraisals are a good thing for employees and the company, but most aren't aware of important and powerful secondary effects of doing performance appraisals. One is the ability to defuse ticking time bombs. Many employees will bring personal complaints to the performance appraisal table. You'll learn things you may never otherwise discover. Conflicts, unfairness, resource deficiencies, discriminatory problems, harassment, reports of theft, and existing safety risks all may show up at the performance appraisal discussion. Beyond these practical matters, performance appraisals empower employees and are a good way to bond with them. Performance appraisals help create loyalty and establish direction, help employees feel like they have goals and a stake in outcome, and help them feel in control of their lives. Experience shows that employees feel ignored and hurt if they don't get appraisals—even if they don't anticipate a good one!

**EAPs are programs** that help employees improve job performance, in many cases by resolving personal problems that can interfere with job performance. Making the EAP an alternative to discipline affords the employee an opportunity to get help instead of being given a disciplinary action warranted for subpar performance or a workplace rule infraction. EAPs lose value when they are treated as substitutes for disciplinary action. This practice uses the EAP as a disciplinary response by the supervisor, who makes a referral to provide a consequence for subpar performance or work rule violations. The latter damages the EAP's perception by employees as a positive, safe, and constructive means to resolving personal problems that may interfere with job performance.

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■ **In a meeting, an employee was starting to criticize a peer when he paused and said, “I was told in the EAP to be more positive, so let me restate that.” No one knew he had been to the EAP. It was a bit awkward, but is there any problem with this type of disclosure?**

**There is nothing improper** about an individual disclosing participation in the EAP. In fact, some people find it helps to share the insights they gain from the EAP with their friends at work. Telling others about their EAP sessions can strengthen their commitment to follow through and change their behavior. By stating his goal of speaking more positively, an employee can reinforce what he learned from the EA professional. While it’s fine for EAP participants to declare how they intend to modify their own behavior, it would be inappropriate for them to reveal what was said about others in the EAP. In the above example, the employee would be on shaky ground if he said, “I was told in the EAP that some of you are intimidated by me, so I need to lighten up.”

■ **My boss says I need to develop better ways to motivate my staff. But I think I do a really good job of explaining what they must do and what’s at stake. Doesn’t that make me a strong motivator?**

**There is more to motivating** employees than telling them what to do and why it matters. You also need to arouse their passion about work. That requires an awareness of their “hot buttons”—a keen understanding of what they value most. Examples include recognition, money, flexibility, job security, or freedom and independence. The only way you can identify what drives someone is to listen and learn. Chat with each of your employees to find out about their goals, aspirations, and special skills and talents that they want to apply more fully to their jobs. Be sure to ask what causes them to feel motivated. They will tell you. In the meantime, assume that enjoying personal growth in one’s work, earning sincere praise, and doing meaningful work are three core motivators for just about everyone.

■ **I am a recovering alcoholic, and although I have no intention of disclosing it, my employee told me he is going to Alcoholics Anonymous to “try to cut back” on his drinking. He needs medical detoxification, not just AA. Should I say anything? There are no performance issues.**

**No, you should not say** anything to your employee. Your experience as a recovering alcoholic does not qualify you to offer unsolicited advice to him. As with any illness, assure your employee that you will provide whatever support you can during this challenging time. Praise him for going to AA, and urge him to make it a top priority. Strongly suggest that he take advantage of the services offered by the EAP. If he truly needs detoxification, then it will become clear soon enough as he works closely with other AA members, many of whom understand the role of medical support for addictive disease in the initiation of long-term, successful recovery.

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■ **I have made promises that I have not been able to keep concerning increasing people's pay, changing the work unit, and hiring help to share the workload. I haven't kept these promises because I don't have final "say-so." How do I improve my reputation?**

**The desire to say anything** that will improve morale sometimes leads supervisors to make promises they can't keep. If you lack the authority to fulfill certain promises, don't make them. Failure to follow through undermines your ability to supervise your unit. You lose credibility, and your employees will look elsewhere for leadership. The next time you're tempted to state a promise, stop and ask yourself if you can control variables that may keep you from delivering on it. Enlist higher-ups to support your goal. Confirm that internal systems are in place so that you can do what you say. Check that you have the tools and resources (such as the necessary budget) to deliver on your commitment. When you do decide to issue a promise, treat it seriously. Write it down in your day planner. Set mini-deadlines along the way so that you hold yourself accountable for making steady progress. Keep employees informed so that they appreciate your diligence and determination. Don't get caught with them needing to remind you.

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■ **I disciplined an employee with a three-day suspension and immediately had several employees confront me. They insisted on knowing all the particulars, but I said it was inappropriate to discuss it. They were very angry at me, but did I do the right thing?**

**Yes. The information related** to the discipline of an employee is not public information. It's a private matter between you and the individual. It is natural for others to be curious—to want to play judge and jury—but that does not mean you must indulge them. Revealing the specifics of a disciplinary action to employees can lower their confidence in your leadership. Staffers know that a supervisor must show discretion and respect each person's privacy. As much as they may clamor to know what happened and why, they surely realize that you would be acting irresponsibly if you shared the details of the suspension. Your best response is "I'm sure you can understand that this is confidential, and I cannot discuss it." If they persist, resist the urge to modify your response. The minute you start revealing little bits of information, employees will demand to know even more.

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## NOTES



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■ We have several marketing teams, and conflict within one team led me to ask the EAP to provide team-building sessions. There's been some teasing by members of the other three teams—comments such as "psycho-team," etc. The team needing help is now reluctant to participate. What should I do?

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■ We terminated an employee for poor performance. He was participating in the EAP at the time, but the job action was unrelated. Others now fear that their jobs will be jeopardized if I refer them to the EAP. How can I convince them that the termination was totally unrelated?

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■ My employee returned after a supervisor referral and stated, "Yeah, I went to the EAP, and now they know the whole

If any of the team members who participated in the EAP team-building sessions improve their performance and emerge as high-achieving stars, then the name-calling should subside. Consider this strategy: Refer one of the other teams to the EAP—especially the one with the most vocal teasers. Explain that the EAP helps everyone acquire tools and skills, and that it's only fair that you give another group a chance to experience this benefit. The teasers' attitude will change as they discover firsthand what the EAP has to offer. Encouraging members of different groups to work together breaks down barriers among them and forces them to collaborate respectfully. So reward teams based on cooperation, not competition. Also, measure everyone's performance using objective, quantifiable outcomes. Tabulate and distribute the results on a regular basis so that everyone can track each other's progress.

**Policies that establish** EAPs always include the provision that participation cannot cause an employee's job security or promotional opportunities to be threatened. Both the policy and the organizational culture must make it clear to employees that getting help is a positive and useful step that top management supports. Undoubtedly, employees see that the vast majority of people who use the EAP remain in their jobs without incident. Still, it is important to remind employees of the EAP policy to allay fears and false associations like the one you describe. Fear about whether an EAP is truly confidential or safe is normal, but it can sabotage a program's utilization if no promotional strategy exists to counter it. Although you cannot discuss confidential information, remind employees that using the EAP is considered a positive thing, not a negative one. When everyone understands your organization's grounds for termination—unacceptable performance despite repeated written and oral warnings—then they will see that the EAP can only help, not hurt.

**It is not unusual for** employees to visit the EAP and vent their frustrations about supervisors in a confidential setting. Do not be concerned. This is a positive step that will facilitate a helping relationship between the EAP and the employee. EA professionals regularly anticipate that employees will impart their side of the story, but the focus of the EAP interview will

■ **story, not just yours." The EAP reports directly to top management, and I am a bit concerned about whether the EAP heard a bunch of distortions and what they may think.**

be on correcting performance issues, identifying personal problems, and making recommendations about areas over which the employee has control. Reports of your personality issues and supervision practices are not the focus of change in an EAP interview with your employee. Sharing as much information about the job performance issues of your employee with the EAP prior to a supervisor referral will assist the EA professional in putting such reports in perspective. The EAP can then prompt employees to examine their feelings and take steps toward change.

■ **One of my employees has benefited greatly from the EAP. If she gives me permission to cite her as an example of how it can help, can I direct other workers to her who want to learn more about the EAP?**

**Regardless of whether** or not she gives permission, it's a bad idea to refer other workers to her to discuss the EAP. This creates a dangerous precedent; employees should never be placed in a position of providing testimony about their EAP experiences. For starters, this would reduce the anonymity that EAP clients often need. It might also taint others' perceptions of how the EAP works. Moreover, your employee may be subtly pressured by peers to reveal sensitive information that she may later regret divulging. If employees want to learn more about the EAP, direct them to promotional venues such as brochures or to a Web site. A positive personal experience with the EAP, if you feel comfortable sharing it, would also be helpful.

■ **I am not sure that I am cut out to supervise people. I hesitate to confront my employees, and I dread meeting with them in a group. Sometimes I delegate supervision to others, and I avoid meeting with complainers. Should I look for another job or use the EAP to help me?**

**Before you conclude** that you're not equipped to manage people, discuss your concerns with an EA professional. Each of the issues you've mentioned is a common challenge that supervisors face. Many supervisors dislike confrontation and take pains to avoid it. You may never learn to enjoy it, but you can develop strategies to communicate clearly and diplomatically in potentially adversarial situations. Dreading team meetings may stem from shyness, discomfort with group dynamics, or other factors. The EAP can help you develop strategies to assert yourself in groups and become more comfortable leading discussions and giving presentations. Delegation is actually a learned skill. Effective supervisors usually learn that in order to gain power, they have to give some of it up. So the fact that you allow others to step into your role may actually work to your advantage, as long as you remain accountable for the results.

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## NOTES

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■ **We employ an ethnically diverse mix of people. While there's no evidence of racism here, I sense trouble brewing. Is the EAP able to promote tolerance or cross-cultural awareness?**

There's no single cure-all to create harmony in an ethnically diverse work environment. But the EAP can serve as a safe and effective outlet for individuals to express their work-related concerns or frustrations. Complaints of discrimination, however, should be addressed through human resources or management. If employees feel resentment toward others, they can vent to the EA professional and develop new ways to address interpersonal hostilities. For instance, they can learn strategies to improve how they collaborate in teams and look beyond their differences to achieve a greater good. At the same time, management can play a role in bringing a diverse workforce together. By setting an example of tolerance, fairness, and mutual understanding, the organization's managers can send a message for employees to follow their lead. It's precisely when trouble is brewing that these leaders should speak out about the need for equality, empathy, and shared goals.

■ **One of my best workers seems more lethargic lately, and her error rate is increasing. She says she's "sleep deprived," but she refuses to take the sleeping pills that her doctor prescribes. Can the EAP help her?**

The EAP can help her grapple with her work performance issues, but it won't replace the role of her medical doctor. It is important that she discuss her sleep difficulties and other health matters with her treating physician. Her resistance to taking prescribed medication may be something the EAP can discuss with her. Sleep problems can sometimes mask other ailments, so it's the doctor's job to examine the patient, review her medical history, and make a more complete diagnosis. The EAP can work hand in hand with the doctor to provide support and encouragement so that the employee sticks to the treatment plan. It can also help motivate her to regain her stature as one of your organization's best workers. As a reminder, when making a referral, be sure to base it on the performance, not on the sleep problems.

■ **Some people have the skills to supervise employees, but don't use them. Their personality may simply be passive and nonconfrontational. I know the EAP can teach skills, but what if a supervisor seems unable to**

Our personalities are not set in stone. People can change. The key is paving the way for them to modify their behavior in a constructive way. So there's hope in your situation, as long as the supervisor—under expert guidance—explores his or her personality traits in more depth. The EA professional is equipped to help the supervisor evaluate any long-term issues that cause the types of behavior that you've observed. The EAP can also refer the supervisor to a mental health professional who can analyze the individual as a whole and provide fresh insight into the

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■ **put these skills to use? Are situations like this hopeless?**

shaping influences that have led to passivity and fear of confrontation. Through this process, the supervisor can gain psychological awareness that, in turn, will set the stage for skill development.

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■ **After five years, I've grown disillusioned with managing people. It's too exasperating! Any ideas on how I can transition out of a supervisory role without taking a demotion?**

**Many supervisors throw** up their arms from time to time with the frustrations of the job. Even the best supervisors experience "people problems" that can lead to burnout. After investing five years in your current role, however, it may be worthwhile to discover what's driving your exasperation, so that you can assess your situation with greater clarity and perspective. The EAP can assist you in identifying the core issues that you're facing—and what steps you can take to derive more satisfaction from supervising employees. You may learn that you're less willing to trust people or put faith in their capacity to improve. Or you may find that you've lost confidence after making personnel decisions that backfired. The EAP can help you step back, analyze the factors behind your disillusionment, and take action to regain your enthusiasm—before you take drastic action and bail out.

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■ **When I lead staff meetings, I notice that people don't listen to me. They talk among themselves and don't treat me with proper respect. How can I command attention without alienating them? I don't see this happening with other supervisors, and I can't determine what they do differently.**

**Employees will listen** to you more respectfully if you apply savvy communication skills. For starters, never talk over others. If staffers talk among themselves, keep quiet. Your silence sends a message that you're going to wait until everyone's paying attention. When you're addressing your team and you suddenly notice a pocket of chitchat among the group, stop midsentence and stare at the talkers until they stop. Another technique to induce people to listen to you is to build suspense. Examples: Pose a dilemma and promise to resolve it at the end of the meeting—or withhold the latest sales figures until after you give employees a chance to guess. (You can give a fun gift to the winner.) Also, use your voice well. Vary your volume and tempo so that you don't lapse into a monotone. When you're about to share critical information, experiment with the technique of speaking softly so that everyone must listen carefully to hear what you say.

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■ **One of my employees has benefited greatly from the EAP. If she gives me permission to cite her as an example of how it can help, can I direct other workers to her who want to learn more about the EAP?**

**Regardless of whether** or not she gives permission, it's a bad idea to refer other workers to her to discuss the EAP. This creates a dangerous precedent; employees should never be placed in a position of providing testimony about their EAP experiences. For starters, this would reduce the anonymity that EAP clients often need. It might also taint others' perceptions of how the EAP works. Moreover, your employee may be subtly pressured by peers to reveal sensitive information that she may later regret divulging. If employees want to learn more about the EAP, direct them to promotional venues such as brochures or to a Web site. A positive personal experience with the EAP, if you feel comfortable sharing it, would also be helpful.

■ **I am not sure that I am cut out to supervise people. I hesitate to confront my employees, and I dread meeting with them in a group. Sometimes I delegate supervision to others, and I avoid meeting with complainers. Should I look for another job or use the EAP to help me?**

**Before you conclude** that you're not equipped to manage people, discuss your concerns with an EA professional. Each of the issues you've mentioned is a common challenge that supervisors face. Many supervisors dislike confrontation and take pains to avoid it. You may never learn to enjoy it, but you can develop strategies to communicate clearly and diplomatically in potentially adversarial situations. Dreading team meetings may stem from shyness, discomfort with group dynamics, or other factors. The EAP can help you develop strategies to assert yourself in groups and become more comfortable leading discussions and giving presentations. Delegation is actually a learned skill. Effective supervisors usually learn that in order to gain power, they have to give some of it up. So the fact that you allow others to step into your role may actually work to your advantage, as long as you remain accountable for the results.

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## NOTES

# Frontline Supervisor



■ **In a meeting, an employee was starting to criticize a peer when he paused and said, “I was told in the EAP to be more positive, so let me restate that.” No one knew he had been to the EAP. It was a bit awkward, but is there any problem with this type of disclosure?**

**There is nothing improper** about an individual disclosing participation in the EAP. In fact, some people find it helps to share the insights they gain from the EAP with their friends at work. Telling others about their EAP sessions can strengthen their commitment to follow through and change their behavior. By stating his goal of speaking more positively, an employee can reinforce what he learned from the EA professional. While it’s fine for EAP participants to declare how they intend to modify their own behavior, it would be inappropriate for them to reveal what was said about others in the EAP. In the above example, the employee would be on shaky ground if he said, “I was told in the EAP that some of you are intimidated by me, so I need to lighten up.”

■ **My boss says I need to develop better ways to motivate my staff. But I think I do a really good job of explaining what they must do and what’s at stake. Doesn’t that make me a strong motivator?**

**There is more to motivating** employees than telling them what to do and why it matters. You also need to arouse their passion about work. That requires an awareness of their “hot buttons”—a keen understanding of what they value most. Examples include recognition, money, flexibility, job security, or freedom and independence. The only way you can identify what drives someone is to listen and learn. Chat with each of your employees to find out about their goals, aspirations, and special skills and talents that they want to apply more fully to their jobs. Be sure to ask what causes them to feel motivated. They will tell you. In the meantime, assume that enjoying personal growth in one’s work, earning sincere praise, and doing meaningful work are three core motivators for just about everyone.

■ **I am a recovering alcoholic, and although I have no intention of disclosing it, my employee told me he is going to Alcoholics Anonymous to “try to cut back” on his drinking. He needs medical detoxification, not just AA. Should I say anything? There are no performance issues.**

**No, you should not say** anything to your employee. Your experience as a recovering alcoholic does not qualify you to offer unsolicited advice to him. As with any illness, assure your employee that you will provide whatever support you can during this challenging time. Praise him for going to AA, and urge him to make it a top priority. Strongly suggest that he take advantage of the services offered by the EAP. If he truly needs detoxification, then it will become clear soon enough as he works closely with other AA members, many of whom understand the role of medical support for addictive disease in the initiation of long-term, successful recovery.

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■ **I have made promises that I have not been able to keep concerning increasing people's pay, changing the work unit, and hiring help to share the workload. I haven't kept these promises because I don't have final "say-so." How do I improve my reputation?**

**The desire to say anything** that will improve morale sometimes leads supervisors to make promises they can't keep. If you lack the authority to fulfill certain promises, don't make them. Failure to follow through undermines your ability to supervise your unit. You lose credibility, and your employees will look elsewhere for leadership. The next time you're tempted to state a promise, stop and ask yourself if you can control variables that may keep you from delivering on it. Enlist higher-ups to support your goal. Confirm that internal systems are in place so that you can do what you say. Check that you have the tools and resources (such as the necessary budget) to deliver on your commitment. When you do decide to issue a promise, treat it seriously. Write it down in your day planner. Set mini-deadlines along the way so that you hold yourself accountable for making steady progress. Keep employees informed so that they appreciate your diligence and determination. Don't get caught with them needing to remind you.

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■ **I disciplined an employee with a three-day suspension and immediately had several employees confront me. They insisted on knowing all the particulars, but I said it was inappropriate to discuss it. They were very angry at me, but did I do the right thing?**

**Yes. The information related** to the discipline of an employee is not public information. It's a private matter between you and the individual. It is natural for others to be curious—to want to play judge and jury—but that does not mean you must indulge them. Revealing the specifics of a disciplinary action to employees can lower their confidence in your leadership. Staffers know that a supervisor must show discretion and respect each person's privacy. As much as they may clamor to know what happened and why, they surely realize that you would be acting irresponsibly if you shared the details of the suspension. Your best response is "I'm sure you can understand that this is confidential, and I cannot discuss it." If they persist, resist the urge to modify your response. The minute you start revealing little bits of information, employees will demand to know even more.

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## NOTES



***For assistance call  
800-327-2723***

# Frontline Supervisor



■ **We employ an ethnically diverse mix of people. While there's no evidence of racism here, I sense trouble brewing. Is the EAP able to promote tolerance or cross-cultural awareness?**

**There's no single cure-all** to create harmony in an ethnically diverse work environment. But the EAP can serve as a safe and effective outlet for individuals to express their work-related concerns or frustrations. Complaints of discrimination, however, should be addressed through human resources or management. If employees feel resentment toward others, they can vent to the EA professional and develop new ways to address interpersonal hostilities. For instance, they can learn strategies to improve how they collaborate in teams and look beyond their differences to achieve a greater good. At the same time, management can play a role in bringing a diverse workforce together. By setting an example of tolerance, fairness, and mutual understanding, the organization's managers can send a message for employees to follow their lead. It's precisely when trouble is brewing that these leaders should speak out about the need for equality, empathy, and shared goals.

■ **One of my best workers seems more lethargic lately, and her error rate is increasing. She says she's "sleep deprived," but she refuses to take the sleeping pills that her doctor prescribes. Can the EAP help her?**

**The EAP can help her** grapple with her work performance issues, but it won't replace the role of her medical doctor. It is important that she discuss her sleep difficulties and other health matters with her treating physician. Her resistance to taking prescribed medication may be something the EAP can discuss with her. Sleep problems can sometimes mask other ailments, so it's the doctor's job to examine the patient, review her medical history, and make a more complete diagnosis. The EAP can work hand in hand with the doctor to provide support and encouragement so that the employee sticks to the treatment plan. It can also help motivate her to regain her stature as one of your organization's best workers. As a reminder, when making a referral, be sure to base it on the performance, not on the sleep problems.

■ **Some people have the skills to supervise employees, but don't use them. Their personality may simply be passive and nonconfrontational. I know the EAP can teach skills, but what if a supervisor seems unable to**

**Our personalities are** not set in stone. People can change. The key is paving the way for them to modify their behavior in a constructive way. So there's hope in your situation, as long as the supervisor—under expert guidance—explores his or her personality traits in more depth. The EA professional is equipped to help the supervisor evaluate any long-term issues that cause the types of behavior that you've observed. The EAP can also refer the supervisor to a mental health professional who can analyze the individual as a whole and provide fresh insight into the

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■ **put these skills to use? Are situations like this hopeless?**

shaping influences that have led to passivity and fear of confrontation. Through this process, the supervisor can gain psychological awareness that, in turn, will set the stage for skill development.

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■ **After five years, I've grown disillusioned with managing people. It's too exasperating! Any ideas on how I can transition out of a supervisory role without taking a demotion?**

**Many supervisors throw** up their arms from time to time with the frustrations of the job. Even the best supervisors experience "people problems" that can lead to burnout. After investing five years in your current role, however, it may be worthwhile to discover what's driving your exasperation, so that you can assess your situation with greater clarity and perspective. The EAP can assist you in identifying the core issues that you're facing—and what steps you can take to derive more satisfaction from supervising employees. You may learn that you're less willing to trust people or put faith in their capacity to improve. Or you may find that you've lost confidence after making personnel decisions that backfired. The EAP can help you step back, analyze the factors behind your disillusionment, and take action to regain your enthusiasm—before you take drastic action and bail out.

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■ **When I lead staff meetings, I notice that people don't listen to me. They talk among themselves and don't treat me with proper respect. How can I command attention without alienating them? I don't see this happening with other supervisors, and I can't determine what they do differently.**

**Employees will listen** to you more respectfully if you apply savvy communication skills. For starters, never talk over others. If staffers talk among themselves, keep quiet. Your silence sends a message that you're going to wait until everyone's paying attention. When you're addressing your team and you suddenly notice a pocket of chitchat among the group, stop midsentence and stare at the talkers until they stop. Another technique to induce people to listen to you is to build suspense. Examples: Pose a dilemma and promise to resolve it at the end of the meeting—or withhold the latest sales figures until after you give employees a chance to guess. (You can give a fun gift to the winner.) Also, use your voice well. Vary your volume and tempo so that you don't lapse into a monotone. When you're about to share critical information, experiment with the technique of speaking softly so that everyone must listen carefully to hear what you say.

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