

# 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**



***For Assistance Call:  
800.327.2723 or 508.990.0777***

Employees—  
Your Most  
Valuable  
Resource

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■ **Our organization will lose nearly 15 percent of its employees in a planned downsizing this year. Should I anticipate that productivity will be negatively affected, and if so, is there anything I can do about it? Will employees simply not care about productivity this year?**

**Anger and anxiety will** play powerful roles and may affect some employees' productivity as they seek to cope with the uncertainty of downsizing. Many supervisors assume that all employees will suffer a lack of productivity when downsizing looms and anxiety grows, but this is not necessarily the case. Productivity may increase for some employees. These will tend to be employees who have a high level of insecurity about their positions but who also have a high need to work. In other words, those who can afford to lose their jobs the least may demonstrate more productivity than usual. On the other hand, downsizing anxiety may adversely affect the productivity of employees who have a low need to work. Offering support and effectively planning communication as downsizing is implemented is important for both groups, regardless of anticipated productivity levels, because the personal reaction of each employee cannot be predicted or generalized to a larger group.

■ **The past few years have been difficult between me and my employee. The relationship is in the pits. He and I snap at each other, our voice tones are inappropriate, we do not exchange civilities, and, frankly, I will fire him the next wrong move he makes. Any advice?**

**Talk to the EAP fast.** The conflict between you and your employee is a risk issue for your organization, and it is a stressor that you must manage better. Unresolved and festering anger can be a hair trigger for violence, lawsuits, theft, property damage, and unpredictable productivity problems. Many supervisors treat ongoing mutual resentment between themselves and employees they supervise as personal matters, but in fact they pose risks for the organization. Between you and the EA professional, decide on a course of mediation that will improve the relationship. You may feel it's too late, but if you are willing to try, your employee may also participate. A meeting with the EAP will likely be attractive to your employee so he can vent and explain his side of the story. You will predictably notice an immediate improvement in the interaction between you and your employee after these initial steps. But that won't last long if you don't pursue the opportunity for resolving your differences with the help of the EAP.

■ **I witnessed two employees in our warehouse making a sexually provocative comment**

**Yes, you should have said** more just as you would to an employee smoking beside a fuel pump. A facial gesture will not prove that you corrected the behavior and it won't demonstrate adequately your disapproval of it. You can decide on the corrective response, but the goal is

**to the secretary who works there. I gave them the evil eye and I'm sure they got the message loud and clear. It was a first-time incident. Should I have done more?**

to protect the victim, act so that the incident is not repeated, and document it. You will then be on solid ground if you are ever officially asked about it. This is probably not the first incident. Let the victimized employee know that you heard the comment and addressed it, and encourage this employee to come to you with any concerns relative to co-workers' inappropriate behavior. State that you will not tolerate disrespect in the workplace or harassment of any type. Make note of this meeting. This is not overreacting. Employers are now in the hot seat when it comes to issues of sexual harassment and must act to protect employees and the employer.

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**■ What is the key issue in leadership often overlooked by supervisors that can undermine their attempt to achieve workplace goals and build a cohesive team?**

**A key leadership skill is** identifying the skills and talents of employees and motivating them to use those skills in the pursuit of organizational goals. Effective leaders invest in developing constructive working relationships with their employees, and they help them apply their talents in the pursuit of those goals. Behaviors that demonstrate effective leadership skills are both learned and naturally part of some supervisors' personalities, but the investment by the leader in authentically meeting the needs of the team is what promotes loyalty and motivates followers (employees). The payoff for effective leadership is acquiring influence. Many supervisors reverse this process or miss part of it in their pursuit of becoming a leader. They focus more, or too much on, achieving goals, while neglecting the needs of employees on whom they rely. Leaders will not generate loyalty without also developing meaningful relationships with the employees they supervise.

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**■ I am very stressed out in my supervisor role. I would like to relax and physically work off my stress, but I have never noticed any benefit when I hop on the treadmill as I attempt to relieve stress. As a result, I don't keep up with it.**

**Physical activity is one** of the best ways to relieve stress, but don't expect much if you only begin to exercise when you're already stressed out. For real benefits, you must make a commitment to a regular program of it, say 20-30 minutes a day consistently, with your doctor's approval. (Be sure to warm up before putting exercise stress on your heart.) If you keep up with your exercise program, you will experience better capability and resilience when you are under stress in the future. This is called stress immunization.

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