

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource — Employees

State Employee Assistance Program 1-800-308-4934 (Toll Free)

■ **My fellow managers and I are seeing an increasing number of employees having family problems at home. I am worried about layoffs and the impact they could have on already stressed employees. The EAP is great, but is there anything more that managers can do?**

Meet with the EAP and discuss the issues that are affecting your employees. The employee assistance professional will listen and may offer suggestions that are appropriate for your role in supporting employees. Unfortunately, you can't address the problems employees face at home, but that does not mean you can't make a significant impact. Employees always feel better about work when they are respected and valued as individuals, and you can energize them by reducing monotony. These factors are key to improved morale. Examples can range from something as simple as holding a staff meeting outside on a nice day to giving employees ownership of their work by leaving some of the decisions regarding assignments up to them. Don't hesitate to meet with employees individually to field questions about what would bring positivity to the workplace and relieve stress generally. You'll discover that employees often have the best and most implementable ideas for how you can support them.

■ **A few employees were in the break room telling "blonde" jokes. No other employees were there, but I felt uncomfortable with the banter, so I asked them to change the subject. Did I overreact? One employee always seems to be the instigator in these kinds of exchanges.**

You aren't overreacting. It was a smart move to interrupt. It would have been a mistake to do so only if other employees were in the proximity of this discussion. The workplace requires employees to be more self-aware and careful of their behavior at work than outside of work. Laws and penalties have grown increasingly severe for employers when work environments are proven to be hostile or offensive. A pattern of these types of exchanges makes that easy to prove, and a case against the employer hardens when supervisors don't step in to stop it. It's even worse if they are participants. As employees become more friendly and familiar with each other, it is natural for boundaries to loosen up, but it requires prudent supervision to step in when necessary. If one of your employees has more difficulty than others in demonstrating appropriate behavior, consider your options for correcting it. The EAP is a resource to assist employees in this regard.

■ **I know that managers are not "born," they're made, but isn't it true that some managers**

The skills of leadership are learned, but some people do possess personalities with more personal charm and charisma than others do. Certainly not all great leaders are charismatic, however. And not all charismatic people are good leaders. This makes leadership skills more important.

easily attract employees to their way of thinking with magnetic traits that can't be taught? Can the EAP help me be a better leader?

Leadership is intensely studied. There are leadership schools, courses, training, recognized styles of leadership, theories, research, and accepted practices that are universally taught. Nearly anyone can learn to apply effective leadership skills. How you speak to employees, the logic used to convey direction and inspiration, and the techniques for enlisting contributions from others in pursuit of a goal constitute leadership. Your organization may have resources to support your leadership education goals, but the EAP may be useful in helping you troubleshoot personal roadblocks that sometimes interfere with leadership skills, such as a need to learn assertiveness, effective listening, empathic reasoning, self-awareness and more.

■ **Is there more stress now than 25 or 30 years ago? I don't think employees cope with stress as well as past generations did. Is this true?**

The acceleration of technology, rapid communications, competition for resources, greater degrees of financial and retirement insecurity and breakdown of family compared to decades ago has contributed to a "stress epidemic." It's a misconception that people can't handle stress as well as they once did, and as a result, they complain about it more. There will always be people who can cope with stress more effectively and demonstrate resilience, but the stress level in a society matches the pace of change society experiences. The pace of change is clearly accelerating, and it is also more unpredictable. EAPs play an important role in helping employees and business organizations not just to cope with this stress but also to thrive in spite of it.

■ **Are there any common myths about illicit/illegal drug use that interfere with supervisor referrals to the EAP?**

The most common supervisory myth about illicit drug use is the belief that an employee who abuses drugs will "look like a drug user," will appear to be an "antiestablishment" type, or will have obvious drug-affected behavior on the job. This stereotype has continued for nearly 50 years. It is still a challenge to help supervisors get past it when training them to use an employee assistance program as a resource and tool to intervene with troubled employees. Modern-day EAPs emerged in the mid-1970s to help address these misconceptions by educating supervisors to stop looking for addicts or drug users and instead to start referring employees to the EAP based on performance or attendance-related problems. Training focuses on doing this without regard to one's suspicion regarding drug use. The result of this major shift in addressing alcohol problems in the workplace was an increase in referrals of alcoholics and, of course, drug-addicted employees so they could be diagnosed and helped.

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