

FrontLine Supervisor

UT Employee Assistance Program • (800) 346-3549

■ **I have a personality clash with my employee. I am trying to practice emotional detachment, but I think supervisors must be careful with personal-ity clashes. I can see how tempting it is to show bias against such persons on the job.**

Not every supervisor will enjoy the personality style of each employee.

You are right about the need to be cautious and avoid something called “social undermining.” This refers to any behavior or attitude toward your employee with the goal of sabotaging and curtailing that person from advancing, achieving, or being recognized for what he or she accomplishes. Social undermining is not necessarily bullying — it may be completely covert. Hindering success is the distinguishing feature of the behavior. Use the EAP to objectively assess your attitude. You may discover certain elements of your employee’s work style or personality that create anxiety for you. This may be attributed to feelings such as envy, jealousy, fear, and perhaps disappointment in your own achievements. These sorts of issues are usually quickly overcome with short-term counseling. The EAP is an excellent resource for such a purpose.

■ **I’m a bit irritated at the EAP for being unable to give me any information about an employee I referred. I feel pretty handicapped not knowing more about the problem and progress. I know the employee won’t sign a release, but how can I do my job if I am completely in the dark?**

Privacy laws like HIPAA and federal alcohol and drug confidentiality laws (which are even stricter) govern EAP information. Without these provisions, EAPs would become extinct. Your organization would then have no practical avenue for intervening with troubled employees in the early stages of their problems. When EAPs were first established in the mid-1970s, noninterference with management and administrative processes was considered key. This still holds true. If your employee does not sign a release, he or she is not undermining your ability to function. On the contrary, the client may be undermining his or her ability to be accommodated by the work organization. Many supervisors struggle to understand this principle. Your hands are not tied with lack of personal information because management decisions are based upon observable and documented performance and conduct issues. EAPs do urge employees to sign releases when appropriate, but work organizations are not, and cannot be, handicapped if they refuse.

■ **What are the best ways to help employees feel appreciated and motivated if there is no extra money to improve pay? Unfortunately, I need every employee to pull**

More money would not have a lasting impact, but the following will: 1)

- 1) Periodically praise an employee in front of others, especially if the audience includes people the employee looks up to or feels are important.
- 2) Keep the employee aware of and included or involved in organizational matters that concern his or her job.
- 3) Keep your eyes open for things the employee does well and make a positive comment about

his or her weight, even if we don't have one extra dime.

■ **We hear a lot about how much anxiety employees experience because of work demands, technology, resource constraints, and our culture. Supervisors aren't experts on anxiety, but what can we do to help?**

them. (This is called “catching the employee doing something right.”) Use the same moment to ask your employee how things are going, and whether he or she needs anything from you to do his or her job. 4) Give an assignment or project that by its nature shows how much you trust the employee with something important or significant. These four strategies combined will cause an employee to feel appreciated more than almost any other approach.

Anxiety encompasses an array of mental health conditions, but supervisors are most likely to encounter a mixture of mild depression and anxiety disorders that, although distressing, aren't deep-rooted conditions requiring long-term treatment. These include being worried or fearful about the future, facing work/domestic life and caregiver challenges, or contending with financial stress, with the effects of poor sleep, strain in personal relationships, and the inability to concentrate at work. Dependability issues may exist. You may see low mood or sadness, or may hear about poor sleep and appetite. You may witness fits of irritability, poor concentration, and forgetfulness. Headaches may be common, and aches and pains may be voiced. Heart palpitations, restlessness, and being “keyed up” and “on edge” may also be evident. As these symptoms emerge, encourage use of the EAP. Always emphasize confidentiality, and forget trying to talk an employee out of being anxious — it doesn't work.

■ **I don't think I should reject an employee who brings a personal problem to me. There needs to be some recognition and processing of the problem for a few minutes. I think this increases the chance of the employee accepting an EAP referral later when it is recommended.**

You should not reject an employee who musters the courage to come to you with a personal problem. You're right; to do so would decrease the likelihood of an EAP referral being accepted. Here's one approach: Listen and give some indication that you understand what is being shared, then 1) Praise the employee for coming to you, (e.g., “Mary, I am glad you felt comfortable coming to me with this.”). 2) Reflect what you heard or summarize the details (e.g., “So, the bottom line is that your landlord is forcing you to leave and you have nowhere to go?”). 3) Set the stage for referral using this logical path: (e.g., “Mary, a lot of personal information is needed to help solve this problem. As your supervisor, I am not the best one to hear and retain this information, but the EAP is ideal. Can I help you arrange an appointment to see them?”). 4) Allow the employee to phone without delay while motivation is high.

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