



Voice

Common Questions and Answers

Q *I have an open-door policy as a manager, but a couple of supervisors I oversee have demonstrated their anger with me for allowing employees to come directly to me. How do I manage an open-door policy so it is a productive process for the work unit?*

A Open-door policies can be effective for identifying issues affecting the workplace, improving morale and taking advantage of the desire employees have to let "the top" know what's going on. However, an open-door policy should exist along with a trusting relationship with your immediate supervisors and department heads by discussing your philosophy about open-door policies with them. Do you reduce conflict by asking supervisors to keep you abreast of important issues so you don't first learn about them from an employee coming to see you? Do you assure managers that you will not use the open-door policy to undermine them? Do you ask supervisors to let you know if they believe your open-door policy has led to a decision they think undermined their authority? Have you explained to supervisors what types of things you will keep confidential that are shared by employees? And, most importantly, do you encourage employees who come to you to communicate first with their immediate supervisor about their concerns before coming to you?

Q *My employee appears arrogant when confronted about performance problems. Although her work issues are obvious, I feel like I am the bad guy when I confront her. I don't think this describes someone who would ever go to the EAP, correct?*

A Your employee's response to your confrontation does not reflect her interest in correcting her performance or taking responsibility for her problems. It is natural to assume that your employee would dismiss any attempt to refer her to the EAP. However, EAP professionals have consistently observed that most employees such as the one you describe will eventually come to the EAP if a progressive disciplinary process is used. In fact, the defensiveness you witness may ironically be a clue to her amenability to a referral. She also may feel guilty about her poor performance. You can't tell from her reaction. Her difficulty in accepting your confrontation may be attributed to the work environment, the nature of a personal problem if one exists, her personality or other unknown factors. Below the surface of her defensiveness she could be hurting and wanting help for an unmanageable personal problem.



Q My employee was referred by the EAP to an addiction treatment program. He has phoned me from the treatment program wanting to leave early and come back to work. Honestly, he sounds great. It is okay with me, but should I call the EAP, refer him to the EAP, or what?

Q I am a stickler for safety in the workplace, but without preaching constantly to employees about it, they seem to lose respect for practicing safe behaviors. Is there more to the supervisor's role?

Q I heard that my employee is going through a "rough time at home" and that she called the EAP. Her job performance is fine, but I want to ask what's going on. Perhaps I can assist her. I don't want her and others to think that I don't care.

A Addictive disease patients may feel excited about being newly abstinent from alcohol or drug use within days of entering a treatment program. However, they are not well. This is particularly true after a detoxification period. Much more is required of the patient to achieve continued abstinence and sobriety. This includes skills and education within a programmatic approach to long-term recovery. Early on, patients may be tempted to quit a treatment process, convinced that they are in control of their substance use and capable of "doing it on their own" (avoiding drug or alcohol use without treatment). This demonstrates a lack of understanding of the chronic disease process, but it is normal for new patients. Contact the EAP and expect to have the return-to-work process coordinated by the EAP professional working with your employee.

A A safe work environment is best won by inspiring a desire to be safe and helping employees see that everyone benefits from safe work practices. It's important to remind employees to practice safety, and studies show that education and awareness are key. However, supervisors underestimate their influence in shaping safe employee behaviors. Be sure to praise your employees when you see safety practiced. Manage troubled employees, seek to intervene in coworker conflicts and learn the role you have in improving and maintaining morale. These endeavors contribute to happy, healthy and productive employees and result in fewer accidents. Encourage peer influence to reinforce safe work practices and confront those that are unsafe. Model safe work practices, never glamorize risk taking and orient new employees to safe work practices early on. Beyond "preaching," these routines will support a work culture of safety that pays off.

A If you know your employee well, you may feel the need to inquire about her personal problems on the basis on heresay. Still, your employee has not shared her personal problems with you, and you should assume she does not want to do so now. What explains your need to ask her about her problems, especially if she is working with the EAP? Do you want to demonstrate support, or do you feel overlooked or rejected that she told others about her problems but not you? Employees usually recognize supervisors as representatives of the employer with whom they have a dependent financial relationship, not as confidants with whom they wish to share personal problems. You can remain detached from the personal lives of your employees and still be a concerned and supportive supervisor. To ignore this boundary can cause you to be a less effective supervisor because you have chosen to incorporate personal issues in your relationship with the employee.

Q I overheard a conversation between a couple of employees, and one of them called me a "toxic boss." I think I can guess what they are talking about, but how can I change my basic personality? I try to be patient, but frankly it doesn't last.

A The term "toxic boss" is not a diagnosis of any condition, but refers to a supervisor who exhibits certain behaviors that cause employees distress. These behaviors include berating your employees, creating division among your employees, appearing to be concerned only about getting the job done and overlooking important needs employees have to feel supported and treated with respect. Some supervisors generate fear among employees with their supervision style, or they act like they care about getting input from employees, but never or seldom incorporate it. Does this sound familiar to your supervision style? The EAP can help you examine your supervisory practices and relationship with employees to improve your ability to be more productive while reducing the conflicts between you and your employees. In the end, both you and your organization will benefit from improved morale, reduced turnover and many other costs associated with being a toxic boss.

Q I have a valuable employee that I cannot afford to lose or fire. He has severe performance issues despite his being my most knowledgeable computer system guy. I can make an EAP referral, but when it comes to leverage like job security, forget it. So, what can I do?

A Obviously, you have not yet decided that your employee's performance is unacceptable. You want him to change because his performance is problematic, but you are resistant to facing the challenges and disruption replacing the position will bring. The advantage of your employee remaining on the job, despite the problems, outweighs your desire to see him go. If your employee's behavior and performance problems worsen, you will begin to feel less ambivalent, and your desire and willingness to replace him will increase. When you reach this point, leverage of job security will be available as a motivator to consider using the EAP. Of course, you risk a crisis of an acute performance incident as time goes by. Many supervisors experience the dilemma you describe, but the real problem is making a decision that things must change now. You may be more ready than you think. Regardless of whether your employee accepts, make a referral to the EAP now.

Q Some of my employees have not had performance evaluations in several years. Some are my most difficult workers with attitude problems. I'm sure some connection exists between lack of an evaluation and their behavior, but shouldn't self-control reign in mature workers?

A Without an effective performance appraisal process, some employees will gradually demonstrate problematic workplace behaviors that otherwise would not appear. The performance evaluation influences a constructive sense of urgency that contributes to productivity and positive workplace behaviors. Even the best, most self-disciplined employees benefit from performance appraisals, not only because of the recognition that comes from a job well done, but also because of the certainty of an adverse response from an unsatisfactory evaluation. Other important benefits of performance appraisals are their contribution to boundaries and the promotion of an influential relationship between the supervisor and the employee. A meaningful performance evaluation is an important management tool that keeps these boundaries from becoming obscure, the result being diminished authority crucial to the supervisor's role.



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***Q** I know employees are angry about having no pay raises this year. As a result, I hesitate to praise them for a good job because I fear they will shrug it off in anger or reject it. What should I do, praise employees or stay away from them?*

***Q** I found myself advising my employee about his personal problems when he disclosed them in a corrective interview. I suddenly realized how easy this is to do. I know I should refer him to the EAP, but isn't it offensive to say to the employee, "don't tell me, tell the EAP?"*

A Naturally, you feel bad about employees not getting the financial compensation they deserve, but demonstrating your appreciation in any way practical is a good idea, no matter what reaction you get. It is possible that an employee will take advantage of it and reject your attempt to point out his or her good work, but other employees will appreciate it. Praising employees never made morale worse. Although it's hard to believe, money plays less of a role in why employees quit a job. Instead, not feeling appreciated is the number one reason they leave according to the U.S. Department of Labor. So, not demonstrating appreciation will compound the problems you face.

A Admittedly, it is difficult not to respond with an idea or a possible solution to a personal problem when one is disclosed in a corrective interview. This does not mean that your employee must experience rejection from you for sharing something personal. Empathetically listening to your employee and acting supportive is a legitimate role for a supervisor. It does not imply that you are offering solutions, counseling your employee or involving yourself in the personal problem. Suggesting that the employee use the EAP if something personal is contributing to job performance problems is also a good move in a corrective interview. It frequently prompts a disclosure of some personal problem. This can make a supervisor referral based on job performance problems even more meaningful for the employee.

For assistance, contact your
EAP professional:
800.999.1077