

The FRONTLINE Supervisor

Helping you manage your most valuable resource: Employees

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The following are answers to common questions supervisors have related to their employees and making EAP referrals. As always, if you have specific questions about referring an employee or managing a workgroup issue, feel free to make a confidential call to EAP for a management consultation at 608-775-4780 or 800-327-9991.

Q: My employee came to me complaining of a wage garnishment notice that she received from our company. I can't do anything about her wages being garnished, but should I refer her to EAP?

A: Wages are garnished when a court of law requires an employer to deduct money directly from the delinquent employee's paycheck to pay a creditor. Garnishments or warnings of impending garnishments may be highly upsetting to employees, who often feel that creditors are treating them unfairly. Frequently, money problems are symptoms of other personal problems, so EAP can be very helpful. Such employees may have personal problems ranging from a family member with a gambling problem to legitimate family expenses that the employee simply can't handle given the current income. You should remind your employee about the availability of EAP, without implying that another personal problem exists. At the very least, EAP may be able to refer her to a Consumer Credit Counseling Service or similar agency that can intercede on her behalf to make payment of the debt more manageable.

Q: I have an employee who never smiles and is only passively compliant. She never talks about her personal life, and eats lunch alone every day. I can't say there's a problem with performance, but should I be worried about her?

A: Your employee may have a personality style that concerns you, but if job performance (attendance, conduct, and quality of work) is truly satisfactory, it would not be fair to confront it. The isolation and withdrawal you describe may appear unusual, and it is possible that you are describing an employee with symptoms of depression, but it isn't your job to diagnose this or investigate it. You can, however, meet with the employee and let her know that she is doing a good job.

Then describe what you see in your interactions with her. Ask her how she feels about her work. Ask her whether she is happy with her job. Getting your employee to talk about her role in the company is one appropriate way to learn more about her and her needs.

Q: My employee is obese and for years has fallen asleep at meetings. He says he's just concentrating, but I bet he has sleep apnea. I've been patient because I had it myself, and I don't want to embarrass him. Can I refer him to EAP?

A: If your employee appears to be falling asleep at meetings, document this as the performance issue to justify a supervisor referral. Although you had sleep apnea yourself, and your employee may have it too, you do not know this for sure. His condition could be related to many other health conditions, including a drug problem. Be careful about unwittingly participating in "armchair diagnosis," which includes subjectively ruling in or ruling out a medical reason for performance problems. Sympathy and your own experience with sleep apnea have led you to postpone an EAP referral that might have led to effective help for his condition. You will avoid embarrassing your employee and make it easier to refer him by not discussing his medical condition or his obesity. Focus only on the sleep problem.

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