

Gundersen Lutheran Employee Assistance Program presents

The FRONTLINE Supervisor

Helping you manage your most valuable resource: Employees

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.

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Q: We had a well-liked employee who recently died after a long illness. It's been difficult for everybody, but what can I do as a supervisor to maximize support for coworkers?

A: A supervisor's actions and the example he or she set are critical to how employees react to the death of a coworker. Although your first responsibility is to keep the workplace functioning, it is important to remember that employee productivity and motivation may temporarily decline. It is natural for those who knew the employee well to be affected by a grieving process that has been known to take weeks, or even months, to complete. This process begins with denial and shock and finally ends with acceptance and a readiness to move ahead with the new reality. Give time for coworkers to grieve and encourage activities that help them to remember the worker. Pay attention to coworkers' actions and encourage use of EAP for any employee who may feel the need for additional support.

Q: I am younger and have less experience than many of those I supervise. Because I fear some subordinates won't respect me, I come on too strong. How can I control my anxiety?

A: Although it's tough being younger than those you supervise, you can anticipate that most employees will have a natural respect for your position rather than discount it because of your age. Dealing with your insecurity is important because it can lead you to believe others don't respect you, particularly if they offer differing opinions or question your instructions—something that might be appropriate regardless of the circumstances. Your own supervisor's demonstrated support of you will help others to accept you in your position. He or she may be able to help you examine conflict realistically and find effective ways of responding to your concerns. Eventually, you should feel more secure, which will have a positive impact on your communication. Use EAP to help you. These problems can have a "snowballing" effect and cause alienation of those who depend on you for supervision.

Q: One of our employees takes long lunch hours that disrupt the flow of work in the office. We don't want to terminate him, but warnings haven't helped. We're not sure a written reprimand will work either.

A: Don't be too quick to dismiss the power of a written reprimand. You can use a written reprimand as a useful disciplinary tool in much the same way supervisors have used the threat of termination to obtain necessary behavior changes from employees. If consistent with your organization's policies, consider writing a letter you feel is appropriate under the circumstances. Don't hold back on the seriousness of the problem, what changes you expect, and further consequences. Then, meet with your employee so he can read and discuss the letter. It is likely your employee will be motivated to consider an alternative to having the letter placed in his personnel file. Make an agreement with him to hold the letter in abeyance pending his decision to accept a formal supervisor referral to EAP.

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