OUTLOOK E.A.P. INC.

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Frontline Supervisor

■ All employees trust our EAP, so if we have an incident at work, such as a sexual harassment complaint, isn't the EAP the best choice for doing the investigation so everyone knows it is fair?

An employee assistance program would not be assigned responsibility for conducting an investigation of a sexual harassment complaint because this is a formal function and the legal obligation of management. The process itself is what defines its integrity, not the personality attributes of the investigator. Many steps and communication points are involved in such an investigation, and documentation is relied upon later to make administrative, legal, and disciplinary decisions. The perception of the EAP as a source of confidential, reliable, and safe help would be damaged if it were to play this role, and such activity would confuse employees, thereby reducing program utilization. An EAP has a specific purpose within an organization and a defined mission within its "EAP core technology," the principles that describe it functions. Playing an investigatory role is not compatible with this purpose, and loss of the EAP's perception as a safe and confidential resource would result.

■ My employee's four-year-old child is coming to work with her this week because of "some logistical problems" at home. I was permitted to make this concession. Her brother was released from prison recently and moved in with her. I am worried that a safety issue exists. What should I do?

It is prudent and appropriate to understand what might be going on here. Ask your employee if she is concerned about the safety of her child at home. This may alleviate your concern or suggest further steps. This is not probing or being intrusive or "getting involved." It is a different situation because you have concern about a child's welfare. Also, talk with the EAP so you are on record as having sought consultative help regarding this matter. Consult with your boss as well so you cover the bases. There may be no serious issues at home, but something is clearly out of the ordinary, so recommend a self-referral to the EAP. EAPs are expert motivational interviewers and have the skills and the assurances of confidentiality needed to learn more about her situation than she may be willing to tell you.

■ I am a long-time friend with my employee who is a participant in the employee assistance program. Can I ask her to sign a release so the EAP

You can ask, but the EAP will recommend against it. Establishing a separate information flow to you creates a relationship that is fraught with risk and assorted problems. The EA professional will offer quality guidance on your role in managing performance so your employee has the best chance of returning to the level of performance you require. Your employee is free to share information, of course, but when

can give me more information about the nature of her problems and how they are being treated?

supervisors try to manage performance and also process personal problems, employees typically diminish their involvement in treatment recommendations due to role conflict. Why? The employee perceives you as a trusted, safe, and understanding friend, and will relate to you on this basis rather than as the employer's representative, which is your job. Undermining this employer-employee dynamic removes a constructive force and sense of urgency that troubled employees rely upon to become motivated and stay focused on treatment.

Should supervisors participate in conflict resolution sessions with employees, or refer these issues to the EAP? It all seems a bit intimidating.

Helping employees resolve differences is an important supervisory skill. Many resources for doing it exist. It is a myth that you must be formally trained to sit down with two warring workers and help them resolve differences. Find an approach that matches your work style and job setting. One effective model entails meeting with both employees together and having each explain their side of the conflict. Don't make judgments, just listen. Next, meet each employee separately and encourage a full venting. Listen empathically. Ask for ideas about resolution. After these three meetings, you will witness a dramatic temporary diminishment of tension. This comes from venting and anticipation of change that each employee experiences. Meet together, discuss ideas—theirs and yours—and write an agreement. Follow up in a week and again in four weeks. Reinforce positive change. Consult with the EAP if needed along the way, but refer your employees to the EAP upon any reemergence of the conflict, and give a strong message of accountability and expectations for the conflict's resolution.

■ **Do some employees with depression still function satisfactorily at work, but if treated, could perform even better and more happily? I have employees who appear depressed, but I can't refer them to the EAP. Still, I bet they would benefit if they went.**

Many depressed employees can function at work adequately, but if treated would likely experience an uptick in their social and occupational functioning. Some employees may suspect they have untreated depression, and some may not identify it at all because they have slowly adapted to its symptoms over an extended period. A crisis may bring these individuals into contact with outpatient mental health services, where the diagnosis is first identified. Depressed employees may appear slow to respond, lacking in energy, or resist engaging with others. Suggest self-referral to the EAP for obvious symptoms only (e.g.,"you look really tired"). Or if work tasks cannot be accomplished satisfactorily, consider a formal EAP referral. Be careful not to adapt to the personality of a depressed worker by labeling them as lazy, quiet, unassuming, or "eccentric." When this happens, others adapt, reduce confrontation, work around the employee, and allow the condition to linger, with unforeseeable consequences.

Call your Outlook EAP anytime at 508-990-0777

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