

February 2020

Frontline Supervisor EAP Newsletter

Q. I am a new manager. I want to be a leader who can influence change within the work culture (or at least within my department) so people become more respectful and positive toward each other. Where do I begin?

A. Start by focusing on yourself and developing a keen self-awareness for how you engage with employees. Spend time understanding what individual employees are trying to achieve and what they think about the work unit. In these interactions, are you being authentic and vulnerable, which means “being yourself” rather than cool and distant? Your communication style is one key piece in helping produce the work environment you desire because it is amplified by your role. Some people mistakenly believe a positive workplace is a matter of good luck. They point to it being the result of the type of work, a sunny office, or a few strong and cheery personalities who are role models for others to follow. Consult with Employee Assistance Services to help you develop the communication style and engagement skills you need in order to reach your goal of creating an energized office that matches your vision.

Q. What are the missteps of supportive supervisors who, although they really believe in Employee Assistance Services, unwittingly send a message to employees in an organization that EAO/LifeMatters are not a safe and confidential source of help?

A. Employee Assistance Services are designed to attract employees with its greatest asset being confidentiality. Employee-clients should have no doubts about it. Supervisor conduct that misaligns with these critical features can undermine the program. For example, Employee Assistance is not a disciplinary program. It can be viewed as such if a supervisor’s referral of an employee is perceived as a punitive step in correcting performance. Supervisors who discuss the referral of an employee with others can also damage the fragile nature of the Employee Assistance Services’ reputation of being a safe place that maintains confidentiality. The bottom line is this: Employees will always have a collective opinion about the nature of EAO confidentiality. This word-of-mouth marketing is crucial, and supervisors must understand how vulnerable it is to being influenced for better or worse by what supervisors say and do.

Q. Will all employees with drug dependency or addictions, including alcoholism, eventually have job performance or attendance problems that come to the attention of management or supervisors at some point in the course of their careers?

A. Not all employees who develop dependence on substances will come to management's attention because of performance problems during their careers. A significant percentage of addicts and alcoholics get into treatment by other means outside of the workplace, and will have no observable job performance problems of any kind prior to admission. This does not mean that these employees were unaware of problems in their relationships or their performance. Occupational alcoholism researchers have observed that hourly workers with untreated alcoholism have more overt absenteeism, while salaried workers experience more "on the job absenteeism." Another term for this is "presenteeism," meaning present at work but ill and not performing at peak. Source: *Harrison M. Trice, "Absenteeism Among High-status and Low-status Problem Drinkers," IRL Research, Vol. IV, No. 1. Cornell Univ.*

Q. Employees and supervisors can both experience burnout. But what symptoms of burnout are generally experienced with supervisory personnel?

A. Supervisor burnout and employee burnout have similar causes but can include different symptoms because of individuals' respective roles. Do you experience a loss of enthusiasm in the role of leader for employees you supervise? Do you find your employees more annoying or unlikable than ever before? Do you resent or feel cynical toward employees who love their work? Do you find that you're growing angrier with upper management, administration, and your supervisor peers? Do your supervisor peers mention or joke that you are too cynical? Do you remain behind a closed office door more often, unable to be reached by employees? Answering yes to questions like these indicates the danger of experiencing burnout, and you may need to take proactive steps to rebound before your condition worsens. Employee Assistance Services can help.

Q. With all the talk about opioid abuse, I don't know anyone who has ever abused them. What workplaces are most likely to experience opioid abuse by their workers?

A. There are a wide variety of addictive substances that exist, but the most common types are classified under six main categories: alcohol, benzodiazepines, illicit drugs, opioids, sleeping pills and stimulants. Opioids are a class of drugs that encompass prescription drugs used to treat significant pain and include illegal drugs such as heroin, and synthetic opioids such as fentanyl. While they can be effective when taken as directed, anyone who takes opioids is at risk for addiction if taking more of the drug than is prescribed, or more often than recommended. Note that substance use is often thought of as an addiction or dependence, but use can be anywhere on the spectrum or scale from recreational to frequent to problematic. As a result, there are varying impacts on lives and workplaces.

In 2017, 95% of the 70,067 U.S. drug overdose deaths occurred among the working age population, persons aged 15-64 years. It is unknown how many were employed at the time of their death. Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/opioids/data.html>

The research shows that in 2017, alcohol proved to be even more deadly than illicit drugs, including opioids. Death certificates spanning 2017 indicate nearly 73,000 people died in the U.S because of liver disease and other alcohol-related illnesses. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research, January 2020.*

Even though you may not know anyone personally who has abused opioids, you can promote [prevention efforts](#) in your workplace. Partner with your wellness and/or employee assistance providers to understand substance abuse from a [health promotion perspective](#) – encouraging people to increase control over their health and manage their substance use with minimal harm.