

FrontLine Supervisor Newsletter

University of Wisconsin Employee Assistance Services
Making Life Work...Better

MARCH 2020

Q. I know from my own experience that the rapid changes that have taken place in recent days/weeks have been a challenge both personally and professionally. I know it is an anxious time for my direct reports, too, and would like to find additional ways I can support my staff during this time. Other than referring them to Employee Assistance Services, do you have resources to help support their mental health and well-being?

A. There is no “one size fits all” in response to your question. Checking in regularly with staff via phone or video sessions can help keep the team connected and updated. Appreciate their efforts and their resilience. You might ask what is going well, in addition to problem solving and addressing challenges. Clarify work priorities and figure out what can be set aside or done differently in a virtual environment. Take extra time to check in frequently and listen to how individuals are figuring things out, or where they are struggling. Adjust your expectations during this period of transition, and encourage them to do the same. What are you modeling for your staff? Calm guidance and encouragement to practice good self-care are helpful. Remind them of what *is not* changing. Help them set limits where needed, and address any conflict promptly. Remember, Employee Assistance Services also provide management consultation for you to be able to gain an objective perspective and strategies tailored to your specific workplace.

Q. One of our employees entered treatment for alcoholism following a referral from the Employee Assistance Services, but then their spouse of 25 years left them. I am worried that this crisis might prompt them to stop treatment. I also worry that they could lose their job. Why would the spouse leave now? What should I do?

A. It can be challenging to hear details about the personal struggles of the people you manage, especially if you are an empathetic and well-liked leader. Your role, however, requires you to be responsible for managing the work of others. If an employee shares these personal details with you, you might ask what you can do to help, from a workplace perspective. Are they requesting an accommodation upon their return to work? Are they aware of all that Employee Assistance Services can offer and how to access services? Contact Employee Assistance to share the information you have regarding this situation, and allow the consultant to strategize with you about the best way to support your employee in getting resources to help with personal problems. Employee Assistance Services empowers people to address life’s challenges – at work or at home – and you can assist this person by being caring and compassionate and showing the way to professional resources that can help. You are in charge of offering a return to work meeting, providing clear expectations about work priorities, and having open lines of communication regarding performance. Please do not stand in the way of someone getting the help they may need, because you are focused on their personal life.

Q. We had a fire at one of our offices just before transitioning to having employees work remotely due to the COVID-19 crisis. It was a close call, but no one was seriously injured. Two employees were briefly hospitalized. Should I seek out Employee Assistance Services for our employees to deal with the trauma, or refer the recovering employees and others to Employee Assistance later?

A. Contact either EAO or the LifeMatters consultation team to discuss the situation and the best approach for offering supportive services. In the aftermath of a crisis situation, offering help is always appropriate. Some options include scheduling time with EAO staff when your employees can phone in for one-on-one support. You can also contact LifeMatters at 800-634-6433 to request a virtual facilitated session for employees to discuss their reactions to this event, receive support and learn coping strategies, and connect with their colleagues. Remind employees that they, and their family members, can contact EAO or LifeMatters on their own – some people are not comfortable participating in group sessions. Don’t forget yourself. As a supervisor, you also may be traumatized by fear, concern, anxiety, or even guilt over some aspect of this event that you believe, even mistakenly, you could have prevented. It is important to take care of yourself. Even if you were not present, it does not mean you were unaffected.

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Q. If an employee is showing symptoms of depression that the general public is educated to understand, why is it a problem to tell the employee that they appear to have depression and skip the job performance problems as the reason for an Employee Assistance referral?

A. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) become relevant when your discussion centers on the existence of a medical problem. If your employee has not stated that they are depressed or have a condition that needs some sort of help to overcome, then it is best to focus on performance-related matters. You are correct - most people know a few or more symptoms of depression, but missing work, coming in late, staring off in a daze, or not engaging with fellow workers effectively enough to manage the work does not necessarily mean major depression. What's more, these behaviors do not demonstrate that you know or should have known the worker is depressed. The behaviors listed above are enough for a discussion and a referral Employee Assistance Services. Employee assistance can explore the issue of depression or some other condition with similar symptoms in a confidential setting by a trained professional.

Q. I have heard a lot about "management consultation" being available through the EAO or LifeMatters, but I am not sure what that means to me as a supervisor. Can you explain?

A. Although Employee Assistance Services consult with managers in many ways, some of the most valuable include engaging and managing teams, offering tips for praising and inspiring workers, obtaining resources, being a sounding board, handling conflicts, improving communication orally and in writing, handling stress, helping you detach from situations that may have emotionally "hooked" you, improving your relationship with upper managers, helping to resolve personal problems, and offering tips on effectively referring employees to Employee Assistance Services. Note that your discussions with Employee Assistance staff are confidential and you can benefit from obtaining an objective perspective and strategies to assist you in performing your role. Employee Assistance professionals will also encourage you to employ self-care and stress management practices to help you function as well as possible. Challenging situations are a natural part of managing others, and you do not have to do it alone.



Employee Assistance Office
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

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