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The FrontLine Supervisor

Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource-- Employees

**Resource Management Services, Inc. 1-800-333-2095
Your EAP Provider**

Q: One of my employees likes to engage in such horseplay as play kickboxing. I will admit that he is sometimes amusing; however, coworkers find him distracting and sometimes a bit threatening. Can the EAP help him compose himself?

A: The EAP can help him control his behavior and act more appropriately in the workplace. For example, he may learn to channel his physical energy into tidying up the workspace rather than play boxing. Once he realizes how his actions can work against him—that peers may lose respect for him and bosses may overlook him for promotions—then he's more apt to motivate himself to tame his wild or playful impulses. Consider the risk of allowing him to continue his on-the-job horseplay. In a recent Denver case, a bakery worker who pretended to kick a coworker wound up slipping and injuring his wrist and developing a hernia. The Colorado Appeals Court said he could receive workers' comp benefits, even though the injury resulted from his horseplay.

Q: I hired an employee, but she isn't a good "cultural fit" at our company even though her work ethic is good and she's a nice person. This can't be an EAP referral—or can it? I feel stuck with this person.

A: When a new hire doesn't mesh with the organizational culture, it's usually because the individual is used to working in a different environment with different values, people, and standards of acceptable behavior. Some employees have the ability to self-correct after an adjustment period. In your case, the EAP can work with your newcomer to compare your culture to her past workplaces. Through this process, she can identify how the behaviors that she developed in past jobs may no longer work to her advantage. For example, an employee may have been accustomed to giving her opinion and reporting observations about others' work freely, but within a new work culture, communicating this information should be done discreetly and formally. Employees are often capable of changes more readily than many supervisors think. This makes referral to the EAP a good move.

Q: I am a new supervisor and need to refer an employee for a reasonable suspicion test for substance abuse. I am very nervous. What are the key issues in making such a referral without blowing it?

A: Review your documentation in the employee's personnel file. Review your organization's unique policies and procedures for its testing program. Confirm that you have written evidence to substantiate the basis for your reasonable suspicion, such as firsthand observations including dates and times. Also document any instances where you've expressed your concerns to the employee—and what happened. As long as you can support your referral with a well-documented file, it will be easier to confront the employee with confidence. Expect the individual to reject the referral at first. Overcome resistance by explaining that your main concern is to provide appropriate help for the employee to treat problems relating to substance abuse if they exist. Many employees will assume they are in trouble and you're penalizing them, so reassure them that the purpose of your referral is to address safety and ability to perform—not to punish them. If possible, rehearse with a trusted colleague and get feedback.

Q: After I referred an employee to the EAP for his anger, he refused to meet with an EA professional and said he just called the program to "chat." So there is no release. The EAP wouldn't fall for this, would it? Doesn't an employee have to meet in person to become a client?

A: What matters most is that the employee develops better strategies to manage his anger. This is more likely to occur if he remains in contact with the EAP. If he's only willing to make phone calls to the EAP, that's better than nothing. Meanwhile, the EA professional will try to persuade the caller to come in for a meeting. In any case, your role is to hold your employee accountable for improvement—and to take disciplinary action as needed if his anger resurfaces. Employees are under no legal obligation to agree to a supervisor referral to the EAP—and they need not sign a release form. But if they refuse to take these steps, they do not reap the full benefits of their involvement with the EAP. With this loss of communication, managers are slow to assume the best and more easily led to believe that no improvement in performance or resolution of personal problems is forthcoming. Most employees do not want such misperceptions, so they should understand the disadvantages of minimal involvement in the EAP.

Q: Our newly hired, recent college graduates are full of energy, but their adolescent style of talking (using "like" and phrases like "Oh, my gosh" continually) lacks professionalism. What's the solution so that we don't project an improper image to our customers?

A: You get what you measure. So identify inappropriate words or phrases that you'd like your employees to avoid with customers. Then start counting the number of times they lapse into "teen talk" mode by observing your staff when they interact with customers. Also alert your employees—and your customers—that you might monitor their phone calls for quality control. Even though you only face this problem with your new employees, make sure to enforce this with *all* your employees. This way, you cannot be accused of discriminating against the new hires. At the same time, invite your employees' feedback. They may come up with effective peer-driven ways to police themselves so that they no longer speak like teenagers.