Employees–Your Most Valuable Resource

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Frontline Supervisor

Resource Management Services (EAP: 1-800-333-2095)

■ **I've always considered myself a driven, hardworking supervisor. Sometimes people kid or joke about it, but I really like what I do. I'll admit for the first time that lately I wonder if I've crossed into burnout territory. How can I tell the difference?**

There is not much to worry about if being driven feels energizing. You may have tiring days or even feel exhausted, but if you still find work meaningful and rest restores you, then congratulations. You aren't immune to burnout, however, which is a recognized occupational hazard. Burnout feels depleting to the extent that your effort no longer produces a sense of accomplishment or renewal. You don't experience feeling rejuvenated by sleep or being off work for a couple of days. Right now, you get up energized and ready to roll, but if you were burning out, you'd begin losing this urgency and it would be increasingly replaced by dread. As a manager, you are wise to track burnout. Recent studies show 71% of middle managers report burnout, the highest of any group. (See high5test.com/leadership-burnout-statistics.) Burnout is treatable, and your EAP is the perfect source for help. You may not be feeling burned out but check in with them to learn more and gain more preventive knowledge.

■ **I feel like I spend half my day managing communication — email, Slack, texts, calls — instead of getting any work done. Is there a better app out there? I'm not alone with this complaint. I also think it's getting worse, and I fear it will be a health issue some day. What's the answer?**

For many people, the fix is not a new tool but fewer of them. Start by examining all the channels you're using on a quiet day off work. Notice how many platforms you check daily and see if you can consolidate any. Set specific check-in times for email and chat instead of reacting to every "ding." Be honest; do you like checking email and using this distraction as a way of taking a break? If so, still experiment with batching because it reduces fragmented attention and lowers stress. Turn off nonessential alerts; you're unlikely to miss what matters. Save time by deciding whether something requires a meeting, a thread, a call, or nothing at all. Discover the art of matching the medium to the message. Ruthlessly declutter your digital life by unsubscribing and unfollowing. Protect your after-hours boundaries by deciding when you're reachable and let everyone know. Here's a biggie: Use one inbox and one to-do list. It means fewer places for things to fall through the cracks.

■ **One of my employees seems distracted and on edge lately, and I found out from others it's because her child is being bullied at school. Is this something I should be involved in?**

Do not involve yourself directly. Many problems, even this one, can be multifaceted and involve issues you cannot examine or exclude. The bullying concern may be real, or it may be a distraction from performance issues unrelated to the presenting problem. This is another example of avoiding "armchair diagnostic" thinking. Employee assistance professionals often assess employees with one apparent problem affecting job performance only to discover a more serious underlying issue no one considered.

This is the hazard of accepting first- or secondhand reports and explanations for performance decline. Proceed as follows: Document what you can measure or clearly articulate in objective terms. This might include distractions, missed deadlines, or frequent absences. You can be compassionate while responding as you would with any personal stressor affecting performance. Mention that the EAP is available and confidential. Recommend she seek support. If issues continue, make the referral formal and include documentation shared with the EAP.

■ **One of my employees goes to the restroom at least 20 times a day. I know my job is to document the behavior, discuss any performance issues, and refer her to the EAP if appropriate. But out of curiosity, what kinds of problems could possibly explain this behavior?**

Your question gives an opportunity to demonstrate how wide the range of possibilities really is for a situation like this one and how it's nearly impossible for an outside observer to guess what's going on. Jumping to conclusions is natural, and peers or managers often gravitate toward the worst-case explanation first. Conceivably this behavior could reflect an undisclosed medical condition — diabetes, a bladder or a gastrointestinal issue, or medication side effects. It could point to an eating disorder involving purging. It could involve substance use, prescription or illicit. It could be anxiety, since frequent bathroom trips are a common response to stress. Or it could be something mundane, like personal calls or avoiding work. That breadth is the point; no explanation is more likely than the others without more information, which is why speculation isn't useful and diagnosis isn't a supervisor's job. And here's another point: You may never know.

■ **I have a tough referral coming up — an employee with a history of anger issues, and honestly, I'm a little afraid of how he'll react. I'm talking to the EAP first because I want to handle this the right way. Does this show my inexperience, or is this a good idea for any supervisor?**

Good call. The underlying principle is this: A supervisor who appears confident and supportive is less likely to trigger a defensive reaction than one who seems uncertain or apologetic, especially in a difficult case involving an employee prone to anger or potential workplace violence. Calling the EAP before the meeting is a solid plan. Describe the situation in detail — the employee's history, your concerns, and what you fear might happen — and ask for guidance on framing the referral. This consultation is confidential and does not require the employee's involvement. EAPs exist as consultative resources for situations like this. Going in with a plan changes how you show up. Employees notice hesitation, and uncertainty can be interpreted as suspicion or accusation, increasing tension. Although there is no history of violence, consider EAP and Human Resources guidance on safety precautions, who should attend, and how to structure the meeting.

NOTES

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