HAWAII SUPERVISOR

A Monthly Newsletter from Your EAP

Taking Care of the Human Side of Hawaii Businesses

November 2026

WorkLife Hawaii

Question: ***My employee says the EAP is for serious problems and dismisses her difficulties that affect her attention, saying they are caused by simple stress. She is going through a divorce, but I did not focus on that issue. How can I encourage her to consider help?***

Answer**:** Many employees think the EAP is only for serious crises or issues that do not include their problems. This misconception may result from rumors, stigma associated with seeking help, or the attention we naturally give to crises over non-crises concerns. Your employee may be minimizing her difficulties because she prefers to manage them herself. This is understandable and not yet a situation calling for a formal referral. You do not need to challenge her or attempt to persuade her. Instead, explain that the EAP can help people think through concerns, explore options, and manage stress before problems grow worse. She can think on that. Don't hide your concern about her divided attention on the job. This is something you can document. Reminding her that having a crisis is not a prerequisite for going to the EAP but may prompt her to later accept help. Offer the program's contact information and encourage her to inquire directly.

Question: ***Should supervisors attend holiday parties at employees' homes where alcohol is served? I feel out of place. I worry about witnessing embarrassing behavior unrelated to work that could permanently change my opinion of an employee and affect my ability to supervise that person objectively.***

Answer**:** Gathering at employees' homes can create situations where professional boundaries become blurred. Alcohol may lower inhibitions, and employees may behave in ways you would never see at work. Supervisors can't always separate what they witness socially from how they perceive employees professionally. So there is some risk associated with joining employees' social circles. Should you do it? Many seasoned supervisors recommend avoiding these very informal gatherings because of inherent risks. Attending private holiday parties is a personal choice, of course. It is not an essential function of your job. But it is a myth that you can't maintain warm relationships with employees without becoming part of their social circle. Sometimes maintaining professional distance protects everyone involved. Regardless of the environment, there will always be an acute awareness among partygoers and coworkers that you are the boss. As a compromise, you may consider making a brief appearance, enjoying the hospitality, and leaving before the evening becomes more informal. If you do choose to make a brief visit, avoid drinking excessively or engaging in gossip.

Question: ***Despite being a supervisor for 30 years, I still don't look forward to difficult conversations where the reaction of the employee is unpredictable. I'll still procrastinate a bit with these sorts of situations. What makes it easier?***

Answer**:** Management literature often mentions how much supervisors – even seasoned ones – dislike confronting employees when reactions are unpredictable. Examples include reasonable suspicion of substance abuse, harassment, dishonesty, theft, and termination. As with most meetings, you'll feel more in control if you rehearse what you'll say, how you'll say it, and how you'll respond. Share the specific issue, the change you expect, and what will happen if that change is not forthcoming. Avoid some common mistakes. One is couching your words or having a lengthy introduction that leaves the employee confused about your message. Another is not getting to the point quickly and respectfully. Let the employee respond. Don't interject or try to control your employee's emotions. It's unnecessary. Your goal is communicating what must be said, not preventing an emotional reaction. Use this as a standard approach to difficult conversations, a formula of sorts. It will make them easier as you repeat the approach.

Question: ***When I suggested the EAP, my employee said, "Hey, do you think there's something wrong with me?" I think there is, but I wouldn't go there in the discussion. Is there a best way to explain my recommendation without becoming defensive or debating his personal problems?***

Answer: Yes, and you're correct – avoid becoming defensive or discussing what you think or don't think about the employee's personal problem. Explain that recommending the EAP does not mean you believe he has a personal problem or needs counseling. And go further: explain how supervisors are trained and instructed never to diagnose employees or look at the nature of their problems, but only to consider performance issues when making a referral. Employees are often quite willing to launch into discussions about their personal problems, leading supervisors into conversations they are neither trained nor equipped to manage. This can lead to avoidance, manipulation, and discussions dominated by the employee. Essentially, the supervisor then struggles to respond or redirect the conversation. Say that your "only concern is the attendance problems we've discussed and the need for improvement. The EAP may help you address whatever is interfering with meeting expectations." Avoid discussing personal circumstances.

Question: ***Attendance problems have led me to make a formal referral of my employee to the EAP, but he says he knows exactly what his problem is and therefore has nothing to gain from an EAP assessment. He promises change. How should I respond?***

Answer: Accept his answer but keep your focus on the attendance issue. The problem may resolve itself or temporarily improve before growing worse. When an employee dismisses the EAP or says it can't help, arguing otherwise rarely encourages participation. Explain that knowing the problem doesn't necessarily reveal what prevents its resolution. An EAP assessment can help identify obstacles, options, and resources. Often, hesitation stems from what getting help requires. Employees may not be ready for the effort. Change may involve having uncomfortable conversations, breaking familiar habits, making difficult decisions, or accepting painful realities. The pain of change feels greater than tolerating the problem. Motivation to accept a referral often improves when disciplinary consequences are certain if performance doesn't improve. Many supervisors struggle to communicate this certainty or overlook its importance. Instead, they chase employees for improvement, sometimes for years, while problems become chronic. Call your EAP to consult and receive next steps to help your employee.

WorkLife Hawaii
A Division of Child and Family Service

Taking Care of the Human Side of Hawaii's Businesses
Your Local Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
(808) 543-8445
After Hours: **(800) 994-3571**
www.WorkLifeHawaii.org
Central Office: **91-1841 Fort Weaver Road, Ewa Beach, HI 96706**

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