

Q. One of my employees is part of this syndrome called “the sandwich generation,” taking care of her elderly parents and also her teens, who I hear are sometimes getting in trouble. I want to be supportive, but her performance is slipping. I am referring to the EAP, but what else can I do?

A. Perhaps unspoken, a key stressor beyond your employee’s personal challenges with aging parents and difficult children is what she imagines you are thinking concerning her situation and impact on performance. Ultimately this relates to job security, and therefore demonstrating support (beyond the referral to the EAP) and reassuring her about her value to the team will improve or at least bolster her resolve and ability to manage these issues successfully. Most situations with employees like this one include opportunities to discuss in what small ways accommodations can be made to make her circumstances less stressful. Have an open-ended discussion about flex time, scheduling, remote work, delegation of duties, and time needed to resolve issues. Of course, accountability must be part of your discussions, but here’s how to do it while still showing maximum support: Be clear about work expectations, set some measurable goals, and agree on regular check-ins to assess how things are going.

Q. I recommended the EAP to my employee, who said his performance issues were influenced by his marital problems. He reported back that the EAP wanted him to get an evaluation for alcohol use disorder before dealing with the marital problems. Should I still anticipate improved performance immediately?

A. Yes, you should still expect an immediate improvement in performance, even while the employee engages with the EAP. When an alcohol issue is suspected or identified, it typically takes clinical priority, as substance use may be the underlying cause—or a significant contributor—to the marital and workplace issues. The EAP’s recommendation to first conduct an alcohol use disorder evaluation is appropriate and signals they are addressing what may be the core problem. It’s important to obtain a signed release from the employee so the EAP can confirm participation and help you monitor follow-through. While the EAP manages clinical concerns, your focus remains on performance expectations. Let the employee know that participating in the EAP is not a substitute for meeting those expectations.

Q. A lot is said about “safe” workplaces. What does this mean, and how do I avoid undermining it once it is established?

A. A psychologically safe workplace is one where employees feel comfortable speaking up, asking questions, sharing ideas, and admitting mistakes. In such a culture, employees have learned they need not worry about being humiliated or retaliated against, or about facing negative consequences for being genuine and authentic. One mistaken idea is that psychologically safe workplaces have no conflict or arguments. Not true. Tough conversations happen, but there is “primo value” of mutual respect and trust. The value of psychological safety is its ability to help employees maximize potential, contribute more, and feel engaged. Once you know you have or are moving toward this environment, it’s crucial to work at keeping it. For example, if you hear dismissive comments or unfair criticism, or if you see people not being treated fairly, step in and speak up. Be sure to also model these behaviors. For the supervisor, maintaining psychological safety requires continued vigilance, but the benefits are numerous—from less turnover to happier days on the job.

Q. Many supervisors believe employees naturally trust them by virtue of their designated position of authority. I think this attitude is not only false but can cause a supervisor to be lazy about building a rapport of trust. What are good steps every supervisor should undertake to achieve this?

A. When a rapport of trust hasn't been built with employees, they are more likely to struggle with accepting negative feedback. The reason is fairly simple. Without trust, feedback feels like judgment. This causes employees to instinctively become defensive to protect themselves. When trust exists, feedback from supervisors is more likely to be interpreted as guidance rather than criticism. Building rapport isn't complicated or full of psychological maneuvering. Your tools are your words and actions. Be genuinely concerned about your employees' well-being. Like you, they know what feels real and genuine. Be sure to "catch people doing things right." Don't just provide corrective feedback. If you're a busy supervisor, it might be easier to move quickly, spot problems, make corrections, and keep things running. But if you take a few minutes to praise good work, you build rapport as employees perceive you as supportive and concerned about their success. When an employee is thinking, "Wow, he or she really wants me to do well," then you're building rapport.

Q. How should a supervisor respond to a subtle comment that could be interpreted as a threat of violence? For example, an employee says, "I am reaching the end of my rope, and no one here wants to see that happen. Trust me." Comments like this make me concerned.

A. An employee who makes a comment that causes you to feel concern is all you need to act. Take these situations seriously, always. Start with documenting everything about the situation, especially the context. Record the date, who heard what was said, and your emotional response while it is fresh in your memory. If you felt intimidated, document it. You don't have to interpret or decide the intent of the comment. Documenting tone is important, however. To do it, focus on how something is said, not just what. Use non-judgmental language to describe attitude, emotion, style of delivery, and body language. These four things allow a preponderance of information needed for management or human resources to advise you. Always consult with them. The EAP can also offer tips on how to document effectively. It is appropriate to say to an employee that their comments cause concern and feel intimidating, and to ask exactly what they mean. This gives the employee an opportunity to clarify or correct their statement, but even more important, it communicates that such remarks are being taken seriously.



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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