



Q. I don't want to diagnose personal problems despite knowing they are likely to exist. Sometimes I know the exact nature of the personal problem. How do I stay away from discussing the "diagnosis" and remain focused on correcting the behavior?

A. Supervisors sometimes wonder how to avoid discussions with employees that may border on examining underlying personal causes of problematic performance. Here's one approach of many: No matter the performance issue, approach the corrective interview with two central ideas: describing the problematic performance and pointing out its adverse impact. Don't ask why the behavior is occurring. Instead, let the worker react to your concern. You might hear, "Well, aren't you going to ask me why?" The "why" is often a segue to an explanation by the employee designed to postpone consequences or accountability. (Of course, a real workplace issue might be mentioned and an opportunity to correct it therefore exists.) However, if a personal problem is mentioned, make a referral to the employee assistance program (EAP) rather than process it. Remember, if your employee does not go to the EAP, you may still witness immediate improved performance from fear-based compliance to avoid further scrutiny or consequences. It typically will not last.

Q. Although employees do self-refer to the EAP, many believe that a formal referral to the company EAP is a punishment. What explains this persistent dynamic? I think it is partly stigma, but is there anything supervisors can do to minimize it?

A. EAPs are voluntary programs with staff who know how to quickly put a client at ease and establish a helping relationship that facilitates personal disclosure. Most employees, even those who are formally referred and resistant at first, quickly realize that the program is a safe and inviting experience. Stigma attached to or fear of the program usually dissipates at this point. Troubled employees who have experienced conflict with supervisors for lengthy periods of time may naturally feel that a referral is a punitive step. Regularly promoting the program in staff meetings, making assurances about confidentiality, and making literature available within the work unit are crucial strategies for increasing familiarity, reducing stigma, and normalizing the services of the program. Work units where the EAP is never mentioned and its literature is out of sight may experience more stigma and fear that the program is not confidential.

Q. Periodically, employers will phone to ask about a past employee's job performance. I refer all callers to human resources, but what's the harm of offering a glowing recommendation if true? I feel a bit obligated because this worker really turned around after using the EAP.

A. Talk to your HR pros. Providing a job reference for a former employee carries risks, even when the reference is positive. Organizations should be aware that any reference, regardless of its nature, can potentially lead to legal or professional complications. One possible problem could be a claim of discrimination if not all former employees receive an equally positive reference. Even when employees are given a good reference, your conversation with a prospective employer may be misinterpreted or you may not be equally enthusiastic with all aspects of a past employee's performance. This could be misinterpreted as problematic by the caller. Talk to human resources for guidance or follow the existing policy. Sometimes, supervisors give positive references but they are not privy to everything in the employee's employment history. Some of it could be problematic. Phone calls of the type you describe aren't usually recorded or documented. This could result in misinterpretations, with negative comments falsely attributed to you.

Q. What are the main ways that supervisors can use the EAP for themselves personally as a confidential source of support?

A. Supervisors can use the EAP in several ways—some highly effective yet often overlooked. Consider these ways of leveraging the EAP for yourself: 1) seek confidential counseling for one's own personal needs; 2) consult on improving communication with upper management; 3) learn stress management tips; 4) seek guidance on approaching employees prior to conducting corrective interviews and participating in constructive confrontation; 5) consult on handling specific situations involving difficult employees and reducing risk in managing problematic employee behaviors; 6) consult on and gain expert advice on handling difficult employee situations, performance issues, and workplace conflicts; and 7) get help with pre-referral planning, post-referral communication, and post-discharge follow-up of formally referred employees.

Q. What is the “Great Detachment”? I saw this referenced in a news article recently and how only 18% of employees love their jobs and the rest are unmotivated, looking to quit, or simply feeling stuck and “going through the motions.” What can supervisors do, and how can the EAP help?

A. The “Great Detachment” is a workplace trend where employees are emotionally disconnecting from their jobs (Gallup 2024). Only about 18% of employees are engaged, which means feeling committed to the job and employer; being enthusiastic and often doing more than expected; finding the job meaningful and fulfilling; and feeling loyal to the employer's mission, consistently acting and speaking positively about the company. Consult with your EAP about the unique aspects of your work unit and what more you can do individually and collectively to connect with staff. Realize that young workers, frontline staff, and remote staff are more at risk for disengagement. Check in with your employees one on one and have mini five-minute meetings to discuss needs, goals, and how work can be more enjoyable. The relationship with their supervisor reportedly is one of the most often cited reasons employees find more meaning in their jobs, thereby increasing their loyalty to the employer, according to Marcus Buckingham, author of *Love and Work: How to Find What You Love*. Source: <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/653711/great-detachment-why-employees-feel-stuck.aspx>



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