

Turning Employee Problems Into Triumphs

Supervisors need specialized interpersonal skills for recognizing troubled employees and guiding them through a company's assistance program.

T rue or false? Supervisors, or first-line leaders as they're increasingly called, should be trained to counsel their "troubled" employees; in other words, workers with substance abuse or other personal problems.

The correct answer is false. Surprised?

If you answered "true," perhaps you believe in the syllogism:

- troubled employees decrease productivity
- supervisors are accountable for employee performance
- therefore, supervisors can accomplish whatever is necessary, including counseling, to return troubled employees to previous performance levels.

In order to counsel, supervisors would first have to know how to diagnose employee problems. Supervisors are not diagnosticians, however. Their role is to manage people and resources, in particular to discuss performance and problems as needed in order to keep employees meeting individual and organizational goals.

"It's usually no contest when you match an alcoholic against a supervisor who's had only one or two hours of training in the symptoms of

**By Mark Ralfs
and John Morley**

alcoholism," says employee assistance expert James T. Wrich.

True abusers are experts at denial and deception; they can fool even the most experienced counselors, Wrich contends:

"When an addicted employee catches on to the company's criteria for reasonable suspicion, he or she will work hard to avoid such behavior."

Adding to the deception, employees who have personal problems are often reluctant to reveal them because they want to appear normal to their peers and superiors. They frequently try to hide any signs of difficulty. Assigning a supervisor to uncover those problems merely takes the supervisor out of his or her element.

"Supervisors are neither comfortable nor proficient as amateur sleuths and pseudo-diagnosticians," says EAP expert Wrich.

Barriers to EAP effectiveness

To be effective, an employee assistance program (EAP) should accomplish the following:

- diagnose the problem
- provide initial counseling
- suggest follow-up referral.

With the right kind of training, supervisors can play a critical role in the last goal by boosting the rate of successful referrals. But if supervisors lack the skills they need, an EAP's effectiveness and its value to the organization can suffer.

A common barrier is that supervisors with traditional training often have problems making EAP referrals because they identify more with their workers than with management.

For instance, a supervisor may not raise the issue of an employee's personal problem because the supervisor doesn't want that employee to lose his or her job, according to John Connor, EAP Manager at Torrington Company in Torrington, Connecticut. Often such reluctance results in supervisors becoming enablers—that is, they unintentionally worsen problems by disguising or ignoring them.

Another barrier is that supervisors are usually hesitant to confront employees directly about personal matters. EAP consultant Dr. Dale Masi points out that although supervisors and managers "are in the best position to monitor employee job performance and recognize potential problems, they are often the last to recognize a troubled employee."

According to Masi, one study found that the typical supervisor in a public agency covered up for a troubled employee for about 12 years before taking action and that the average private-sector supervisor covered up for 8 years.

"It's much easier to close your eyes to problem employees, demote them, promote them, or put them on detail work," Masi contends.

Still another barrier is that supervisors don't want their staffs to think they are on a witch hunt. And they don't want to play detective or become more alienated from their employees than they already are by virtue of their authority.

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For example, a supervisor may fear mistaking an employee's slurred speech for inebriation when it's really due to medication prescribed for a toothache. Or a supervisor may be loathe to assume that the organizer of the weekly football pool is addicted to gambling.

Skills for supervisors

Supervisors can overcome the barriers that prevent EAP effectiveness through education on personal and substance-abuse problems, and through knowledge of how to make effective referrals. When supervisors are educated and trained in EAP skills, EAP referrals increase.

Most companies are not equipped to conduct needed EAP training, so they turn to packaged programs, which may have different methodologies and processes.

There is an effective program that has been in use for several years. In it, the identity of the trainer varies according to organizational need. The trainer can be a human resource or training professional, line manager, employee, or representative from either the EAP or the supplier of the training package.

Whatever the trainer's identity, the duties are the same:

- to present the training
- to facilitate workshops
- to determine that skills have been satisfactorily constructed.

First, supervisors must learn about the effect a troubled employee can have on work performance.

Some supervisors may already know, for example, that nearly one in every ten employees abuses drugs or alcohol. But they may not know that compared with a "clean" employee a substance abuser is

- three times more likely to be late in getting to work
- four times more likely to be involved in an accident on the job
- sixteen times more likely to be absent from work.

Some supervisors may know that troubled employees cost organizations in North America alone up to \$100 billion each year in worker's compensation, health insurance, and benefit costs. But do they recognize that poor decision making, equipment damage, safety violations, and reduced morale are also caused by unchecked employee problems?

Supervisors must also learn about the substance abuse policies and EAPs in their own organizations. They should know that broadbrush EAPs address problems on the job ranging from alcohol and drug abuse to psychological, medical, marital, and family difficulties, as well as legal and financial matters.

Supervisors should also know that many employees with substance abuse and personal problems return to former levels of performance after receiving help. Today, salvaging human resources is particularly meaningful in light of the current employment crunch and shortage of qualified workers.

Finally, supervisors need to understand their proper roles in helping troubled employees.

"The supervisor doesn't accuse the worker of anything; he or she just documents the case," says Richard Bickerton, spokesperson for the Association of Labor/Management Administrators and Consultants on Alcoholism.

Along with education, supervisors need training in the following, specialized skills.

Knowing when to act. A supervisor must continually assess work habits and performance problems. A pattern of unexplained absences, poor performance blamed on others, frequent accidents, or low productivity can be the tip-off that something is wrong.

Documenting an employee's behavior. A supervisor can recognize a pattern of behavior and stay focused on measurable facts by keeping and verifying specific information. Record keeping is important also, because an employee, or an employee's union, may demand to see documentation if disciplinary action is taken.

Maintaining an employee's self-esteem. A supervisor can help an employee maintain or enhance self-esteem, even in a difficult interaction, by gathering specific documentation about work habits and performance problems—and by having a sincere desire to help.

As a result, an employee may be more willing to try to find a solution to his or her problem.

Discussing an employee's work habits or performance problems. It's important for a supervisor to confer

with an employee on how to solve the problem and to gain the employee's commitment to attack it. Discussions should focus on job results.

Following up. When the action that was mutually agreed upon fails to correct a problem, it's necessary to hold further employee disciplinary sessions such as the following:

- another meeting to determine an alternative course of action, which may include disciplinary action
- a disciplinary or corrective session, which may include an EAP referral.

Often a referral to an EAP is made before recommending disciplinary action, but procedures can vary. An immediate referral should be made if

- there is an admission of substance abuse or personal problem
- an employee is discovered with an illegal drug in his or her possession.

If progress made after the initial discussion falls short of the target goal, one or more meetings may be necessary before the supervisor makes an EAP referral.

EAP support skills for managers

Higher-level managers may not need to use EAP skills directly, because in day-to-day operations there is usually a level of supervisors separating them from employees. Nevertheless, an effective EAP puts all managers through the same skills training that first-line supervisors receive. Managers can

- coach and reinforce supervisors on discussing performance-related issues with employees
- provide the skill models for supervisors to use in effective employee intervention.

By participating in EAP-skills training, managers send a clear message to employees, supervisors, suppliers, and customers that the organization is committed to working with its employees to solve problems. That stance is one that organizations must take, especially considering the shortage of capable employees in today's do-more-with-less economy.

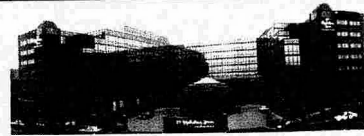
What effective training can do

Effective training refines the skills that supervisors can use by showing them how to

- recognize signs of employee problems more quickly



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Effective training can help supervisors turn employee problems into triumphs for the organization, the employees, and the supervisors.

Increased referrals to EAPs

Conner found that training in EAP skills more than doubled referrals

from supervisors at Torrington Company.

Another advantage to training supervisors in making referrals is that they may be the first ones to see that an employee has a problem, Conner says. "Their early recognition is very valuable for the employee's work performance and well-being. It's going to be a lot easier for the employee to recover if the problem is discovered in its early stages."

EAP-skills training gives supervisors confidence that effective help is available. They no longer feel that they are just feeding people into a system that will ultimately lead to the employees' termination.

Also, when EAP staff members have confidence in the training that supervisors receive, they may cooperate more fully with those supervisors.

Dan Smith, EAP manager at McDonnell Douglas, credits a boost in supervisors' confidence with the increase in referrals at his company.

"Our first-line leaders see the merit of the approach we've taken, and they've found it very useful in solving performance problems and increasing EAP referrals," Smith says. "Our overall referrals have increased dramatically, and supervisory referrals keep growing as training is completed."

"In the past, most of our supervisors were keenly aware that personal problems affect productivity. But many of them felt they didn't have the skills, methods, or support to confront troubled employees."

After training, supervisors feel they have the skills and management support to approach employees whom they suspect have problems.

"Although our EAP proved successful, we know now that getting supervisors and managers to collaborate with the program was the key to even greater success," Smith says. "I see the EAP becoming more involved in the daily human resources environment and gaining a lot of credibility with employees."

Referral versus counseling

It's clear that a supervisor trained in key skills can significantly improve an EAP's effectiveness by

- increasing the quality of referrals
- helping an employee regain productivity and maintain self-esteem
- helping an organization recover human resources.

Trained supervisors can help organizations, industries, and nations mold a more productive and problem-free workplace.

Dr. Abraham Twerski is the founder and medical director of Gateway Rehabilitation Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He sums up the supervisor's role in this way: "There's no substitute for good supervision. You watch the employee, not the employee's fluids." ■

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