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Employees—
Your Most
Valuable
Resource

Frontline Supervisor

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■ **What does the phrase “tough love” mean with regard to the role supervisors play in managing troubled employees?**

Demonstrating “tough love” toward a troubled employee describes detachment or “stepping away” from feelings or emotions that cause you to enable conduct and performance problems. You are then free to act in a way that allows the employee to experience accountability or consequences for problematic performance or conduct on the job. Tough love reflects a change in attitude by the enabler. Detachment isn’t easy. Close relationships between people, whether they are employees, friends, or family members, include a natural and healthy drive to protect and support them. This dynamic, however, can contribute to the person’s problems if solving them requires tough decisions the enabled person would rather avoid. Enabling is “permission” to avoid change. Tough love makes the need for change in relationships nonnegotiable.

■ **I confronted my employee, whose breath smelled of alcohol. Immediately the employee admitted to drinking, thanked me, and agreed to get help. This is a good sign, right? Doesn’t it indicate that treatment is more likely to be successful?**

Assuming alcoholism exists, the cooperation you’ve seen is a good thing, but the rigors of recovery from addiction are challenging to the patient and family members (or enablers). Successful treatment depends on the patient’s attitude toward education while in treatment, willingness to change and practice behaviors to support recovery, the degree to which enablers can be enlisted to support the patient, and cooperation with an effective program of recovery. Practicing alcoholics, many of whom mistakenly believe that willpower is the key factor in staying sober, may experience relief or even excitement over a renewed sense of determination prompted by an adverse event such as a positive drug screen at work. The person’s belief that he or she can “do it this time for sure” may appear as sudden insight and enlightenment. This enthusiasm is no match for the illness without a rigorous treatment program. Cooperation by your employee later when treatment begins will be more telling.

■ **What is presenteeism and why has it become such a popular term in the workplace?**

Presenteeism describes the phenomenon of coming to work while physically or emotionally ill only to experience a reduction in effectiveness and productivity. Coming to work with a common cold and being unable to perform at par is a simple example. Another example is working while experiencing burnout or after a traumatic event. The concern over presenteeism increases during economic recessions because fear of job

loss may push employees to come to work when they otherwise would stay home. There are many indirect consequences of presenteeism. They include lost productivity, passing the illness to others, increased absenteeism, morale problems, and coworker conflicts. Not feeling well enough to work but still coming to work costs employers billions of dollars each year. Talk to your EAP about presenteeism issues, how they may affect your work group, and what you can do about it.

■ **An employee complained of being punched in the arm by a coworker. The “puncher” said it was “in jest”, and that no violent intent was meant. My own kids do this sort of thing. There is a bruise, but some people bruise easily. Is this an EAP matter? Or should I dismiss this?**

Violence at work is not defined by what the perpetrator had in mind. The violent act occurred, the coworker was struck, and harm ensued. Just as important, you have been notified and a complaint has been brought. If you dismiss this incident, it could be established that you responded to it with negligence and apathy. If a similar incident, or something worse, were to occur in the future, how you responded to this incident could be held against you. This incident may appear to you as innocent horseplay or roughhousing, but it didn't happen in your home. This occurred in the workplace between adults, and these facts make all the difference. Investigate properly, refer the perpetrator to the EAP, document how you responded, consult with a management advisor, and treat the complaint with seriousness and resolve.

■ **We had an employee who was dismissed for ongoing performance issues. The employee then accused the supervisor of sexual harassment. The harassment charges had not been mentioned previously. Is this proof of retaliation? Could the EAP have talked the employee out of the accusation?**

The timing of the charges is not unusual for employees who have suffered sexual harassment during their employment. Retaliation is usually not the motive. Here's why: Even with a policy against sexual harassment that encourages employees to come forward and be protected, an environment that does not feel safe may impede the voicing of complaints. Once terminated, the employee no longer feels constrained, and it is easier to lodge the complaint. Until then, an employee may feel some subtle punishment could ensue if a complaint was made, or that management wouldn't take a complaint seriously. Victims of sexual harassment may not want to “rock the boat.” They may fear being seen as provocative or partly to blame. The thought of providing an accurate account of the sexual harassment history can also feel daunting. EAP support is always a good idea for employees facing a crisis, but the EAP is not a “fire wall” after the fact. An organization's best intervention is prevention through education and zero tolerance for harassment.

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