

 *Coleman*
WELLNESS SOLUTIONSSM

A Monthly Newsletter for Supervisors

Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource — Employees

Q. I am shocked at the number of murder-suicides in the news. Has the government, namely the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), said this is related to the economy? Besides knowing the warning signs, what can employees do to help reduce these incidents?

A. As early as 1995, the federal government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, NIOSH, has published information on preventing violence in the workplace, but no official position based upon research documents a correlation between murder-suicide and the present economic climate. Many experts argue that there is a correlation, but mass killings also happen in the best of economic times. There are hundreds of workplace homicides every year. When notes are left by perpetrators, the common denominators are the feelings of being ridiculed, belittled, persecuted, or simply frustrated by their inability to adapt. Research does show that in the midst of a downturn domestic violence increases. NIOSH has many recommendations to help prevent violence at work. Most relate to environmental controls - lighting, awareness, signage, etc. Only one specifically relates to employee behavior - being trained in conflict resolution and nonviolent responses to conflict.

Q. I dislike correcting an employee's performance and dealing with matters of discipline. I know this is a normal part of a supervisor's job description, so how do I learn to be less emotionally affected by this part of my job? Can the EAP help me?

A. Let's face it, these types of interviews are not pleasant, and no managers enjoy them. If you feel that your performance is substandard because of the inability to manage these interviews successfully, consultative help from the EAP is a smart move. The EAP will provide tips and tactics to help make them go smoother. Practice and learn a basic "model" or structure to a disciplinary (corrective) interview. The employee assistance professional can play the role of employee. One approach is to state the work standard, describe the unacceptable performance, list the facts, state the acceptable behavior and expectations, listen to the employee, answer the employee's pertinent questions, and be sure the employee knows and understands what's needed now. Then wrap it up with an optimistic attitude. Caution: Don't drag out these meetings in an effort to make them end on a happy note simply to smooth over hard feelings. This can undermine the employee's urgency to change.

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Q. I am not an "act-tough" supervisor. I tend to be on the soft side because I want people to be open with me. I am easy to talk to. I don't mind being vulnerable and showing my feelings, but some employees act hostile toward me. What causes this reaction?

A. Unfortunately, some personalities will take advantage of you when you make yourself vulnerable. Weakness is an opportunity that is seen as a way to gain control. It is not respected in the way you would hope. Instead, these employees will see you as weak. Typically, you are witnessing your employees' projection of their own damaged self-esteem. Being weak in the past for them was seen as a failing that led to their personal hurt. When this vulnerability is seen in others, it is retaliated against because of what it represents - a weak person who isn't worthy of the same level of respect they have seen others receive. This doesn't mean you should change, but with awareness of how you interact with employees and how they respond, you can tailor your approach in one-on-one meetings so your goals are met in helping employees improve performance.

Q. My employee comes to work every day in a bad frame of mind, seemingly with "a chip on his shoulder," ready to argue or say "hmm-hmm" a lot in a cynical way. How can the EAP counselor help an employee change a "bad attitude?"

A. Your employee's attitude is a problem for you; however, it is a symptom of what's troubling him or her. An employee's attitude, good or bad, is based upon beliefs (past or present) concerning self, others, or the workplace. The goal of employee assistance is to help the employee overcome the attitude problem, and this might include uncovering its source. But there might be no present set of circumstances that give rise to the attitude problem. Have you known someone with a difficult attitude where it seems like a lifelong personality feature? If so, you may have witnessed how a bad attitude that starts with a rationale behind it becomes deep-seated even if the initial reasons no longer exist. This personality type can damage productivity, sales, and morale, and affect turnover. The EAP can help, but your role in quantifying the problem, insisting on change, and reinforcing an improved attitude will be crucial to a successful effort.

Q. My employee has two teenagers in trouble with the law. They burglarized a home, and the media attention brought our company's name into the story because we are a prestigious employer. Naturally, our reputation has suffered. Can I make a supervisor referral for his parenting problems?

A. Your employee may or may not be an effective parent, but parenting is not part of the job description. A supervisor referral to the EAP based on these issues would be improper. This does not mean the EAP can't be helpful. The incident is public news and you can encourage your employee to take the assistance of the EAP, in whatever form that might take. However, don't base your recommendation upon parenting issues. The EAP will know where to begin and in which direction to head if the employee accepts an appointment. Your employee may be upset and embarrassed about the news coverage so is likely to follow through with your recommendation.