

Frontline Supervisor



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■ I will be meeting with my employee to confront his tardiness. There have been five late days this month and it is unacceptable. I don't want to specify a "number" of days late as being too much because it will just encourage going to that limit. Are there any creative suggestions?

Every organization has its unique history in dealing with and managing tardiness. Unfortunately, employees quickly respond and adapt to leniency shown in this area. Even some of your best and brightest, and hardest-working employees, will come to work late if it appears that there is no consequence for doing so. Check with your organization and its preferred approach to this problem. Sometimes managers aren't aware of existing solutions for problems of this type. If you want to get creative, use a percentage rate in the discussion with your employee. For example, if there are 21 workdays in a specific month, and your employee is late 5 days, divide the workdays in the month into the number of late days. This will produce a "tardiness score" of 24%. Call this unacceptable. Require satisfactory attendance to be a tardiness score under 5%. Sometimes numbers like this make an impression on employees and they "get it."

■ I suspect one of my employees is experiencing spousal abuse at home. I have seen bruises and this person often comes to work upset. Is this any of my business as a supervisor? How can I help without feeling like I am butting into the employee's personal life?

Your employee is demonstrating the signs of domestic abuse. From your description, and experience with her, you have a strong rationale for inquiring whether help is needed and telling your employee why you are concerned. This is not intruding, playing the role of amateur diagnostician, or acting inappropriately. Responsible authorities on the subject of domestic violence encourage involvement by others and admonish those who remain silent in the face of obvious symptoms of abuse. Be assertive in using available resources to motivate this person to get help. Base your decision upon an obvious need for concern by others and the repetitive pattern of disruption to the work situation. It is appropriate to make a supervisor referral to the EAP, if necessary, based upon the effect on the work environment, and who knows, you may save a life doing so.

■ I called my employee "narcissistic" in a corrective letter because it describes the behavior that I and others witness. I think this word is not diagnostic, just descriptive. Am I

There are many health-related terms that have found their way into everyday language. It is easy to forget that these words usually imply diagnostic labeling. They fail to sufficiently describe behavior, and therefore are inappropriate for documentation. They can undermine administrative or disciplinary actions. Words like antisocial, neurotic, or depressive, for example, may be familiar terms used in conversations with others, but they will interfere with your goal of correcting performance. They may

wrong? Will it cause problems in my documentation?

also invoke considerations under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Senior management is likely to reject your documentation if it includes this type of language. This will leave you frustrated. If your employee inflates his or her accomplishments, or fails to consider the needs of others, devalues others' contributions, or is often inappropriate and boastful, then say so. Support statements like these with examples. When you find yourself making a judgment about an employee's behavior, say to yourself, "By this I mean _____." This will reduce your tendency to use labels, and instead discover clearer descriptive terms for what you have seen, heard, or witnessed.

■ My employee holds a key public safety position, and I received a report from a coworker that he is not cooperating with the EAP's recommendations since his formal referral. My last report from the EAP is good, so should I ignore this hearsay information?

Your first consideration is the safety of others, so approach this issue from that standpoint. Start by asking your employee in a follow-up meeting if he is still cooperating with the EAP's recommendations. This isn't a personal discussion of his issues. It is a business matter related to the agreement you have with him. Let your supervisor be aware of what has been reported. Also, let the EAP know what has been reported. The EAP will likely take some extra steps to follow up in a way that further verifies cooperation. Your question is a good one because it requires some deliberation about how to respond to hearsay information. Some supervisors might presume hastily that such a report can be dismissed outright, but the safety issues require that it be handled in a different way.

■ Should I pay attention to my hunches and "gut feelings" that tell me my employee is using drugs on the job? There are no signs or symptoms, but he acts like he is proud that he is getting away with something. It's unsettling. Perhaps my dislike of him is my problem.

It's not unusual to periodically have suspicions about employees you supervise. Nearly all supervisors experience hunches or worries about the ulterior motives of employees from time to time. If consistent and ongoing, you could use some confidential discussion about them. Don't dismiss them yet, but meet with the EAP. Several outcomes could emerge from such a meeting. These could include gaining clarity on what is bothersome or perhaps valid about your concerns. You may even discover signs and symptoms you have overlooked that could be documented and acted upon later. You could also learn more about yourself, and how and why you respond to your employee in the way you do. The EAP will help you consider changes in your supervision style or perspective could improve this relationship.

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