

Q. Our supervisors recently struggled with how to notify employees about a worker's suicide and, in one case, a murder at a remote location. This delayed managing the incidents and recognizing these employees' lives. This caused upset among coworkers. How should managers respond to such incidents?

A. The death of an employee, especially by accident or homicide, will thrust the manager into a crisis role that employees instantly rely upon for direction, support, and empathy. Fortunately, from the standpoint of how to manage it, death in the workplace is not new. Step-by-step protocols and checklists exist for managers to follow, although smaller employers may not keep such material on hand. Examples can be found at the American Psychological Association, the Society for Human Resources and nonprofits that focus on helping people manage grief. The EAP can also assist with helping managers find such resources, while supporting employees and later offering more awareness and education about helping employees and recognizing protracted grief and its effects on productivity. Note that the two most significant mistakes managers make regarding death in the workplace is treating such incidences too lightly or turning away from them too soon in an attempt to get back to work.

Q. We have employees returning to on-site work, and many have not been together for quite a while. Is there something I should do as a supervisor to facilitate the renewed team environment, or will this naturally take care of itself?

A. "Reboarding" (re-onboarding) describes the process of reuniting employees and facilitating their renewed role in the workplace. The process recognizes that previously quality teams and effective coworker relationships will not necessarily pick up where they left off. Many surveys report dramatically increased anxiety of employees returning to work. Change causes stress; this alone is enough to make the transition back to work more difficult. Along with many employees perceiving remote work as more desirable, changes in family routines add to employees' stress. A key objective for managers is helping to prevent attrition by facilitating an equally happy on-site job experience. This requires understanding, patience, reassurance, and good communication. Being present and holding meaningful conversations with employees and allowing them to share their viewpoints and opinions about what they are experiencing being back on the job are crucial. Pay attention to signs or symptoms of troubled workers, particularly those who appear unable to reengage. Suggest the EAP, or refer employees as needed.

Q. Can I refer an employee to the EAP for acting "immature"? By immature I mean demonstrating behaviors that are more like those of a teenager, acting out of personal desires rather than putting the needs of the team first, and displaying jealousy and envy of others. This employee must change.

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A. When a supervisor suggests the EAP, it can be helpful to explain early on that the basis for your recommendation is job performance, not your belief that a personal problem exists, and that all EAPs work this way. This issue, perhaps more than any other, is what prompts defensiveness. Also, do not mention the EAP for the first time late in the process of an attempt to correct performance. If weeks and months of difficulty, arguing, or tension have existed, your employee may believe that your motivation for referring now is to “cover your bases” as you prepare for termination of the worker.

Q. I strive to know my employees well so I can assess their needs and develop their talents. When employees don't perform well or keep commitments, or come to work late, I feel taken advantage of and angry. This causes me stress. How can I react differently?

A. Since “immaturity” is difficult to measure, it becomes important to be descriptive of the objectionable behavior so it can be presented in a corrective interview. You can then ask that it stop, be clear about it, and later measure whether change happens. This is not as easy as it sounds, but it is crucial to motivate change and refer the employee to the EAP if it becomes necessary. You may need to witness again the behavior you describe, and document it contemporaneously so it is clear. You have witnessed the employee being selfish and “not putting the needs of the group first.” How is this demonstrated by words or behavior, and what substantiates the attitude and misdirection you see? Rely on the EAP or your human resources advisor for help in how to construct useful documentation. You are more likely to see the changes you want, possibly without ever needing to make a referral.