

Q. Poor job performance or unsatisfactory quality of work is obviously the number one issue with troubled employees. Beyond this, what is the most common problem among troubled employees, and how should supervisors respond?



A. The management research firm Center for Creative Leadership surveyed over 200 supervisors and discovered that the most common employee problem (other than poor job performance) is “inability to get along with others.” Conflict and friction between two employees are not uncommon, but beware of employees who (1) blame others for their problems, (2) make others feel guilty for not living up to their expectations, (3) show an inability to own “their half” of problems, (4) have little insight into their behavior, (5) view discussions about their behavior as personal attacks, and (6) are overly adept at making excuses. These behaviors in combination are unlikely to respond to a corrective interview with you. Making an early referral to the EAP along with well-written documentation is recommended. (If you need help with constructing effective documentation, consult with the EAP.)

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Q. Can I refer an employee to the EAP to help him or her deal with boredom? One of my best workers expressed loss of interest in the work and labeled it boredom. I know this is not a psychological problem, but can the EAP help address it?

A. Work with your employee to examine how the job can be structured in a way that rekindles interest. If you don't see an immediate rally, suggest help from the EAP. Your employee's boredom could be linked to depression. Depression costs business and industry about \$44 billion a year, according to the American Psychiatric Association. There are other symptoms of depression visible to others in the workplace. Do you see any? They include withdrawing from the team, isolating oneself, being indifferent, putting things off, missing deadlines, seeming absent-minded, procrastinating, being late to work, and more. All are quantifiable performance measures. Your employee may not go to the EAP, so be prepared down the road to consider a formal referral as needed. Note that the problem of boredom is a good example of how something that appears minor could be a symptom of a serious condition.

Q. I referred my employee to the EAP this morning because of his attendance issues. When he comes back to the office this afternoon, should I meet with him again? Or should I assume everything is fine, wait for the EAP to confirm his attendance, or discuss with him the expectations going forward?

A. If your employee went to the EAP and you previously had contact with the program in arranging the referral, you should get confirmation of participation if a release was signed. Regardless, meet with your employee and discuss the essential duties of his position, the reasons for the referral, and your expectations for his attendance. Doing so will increase the likelihood of having fewer or no more attendance problems. Then meet a few times over the ensuing weeks and months. This will further reinforce his need to follow through both with the EAP's recommendations and with his commitment to a predictable attendance schedule. Lack of accountability and supervisor follow-up demotivates employees, causing their commitment to change to erode. The time you invest in reminding him and praising his return to proper performance standards will be well worth it.

Q. Can I direct an employee to stop complaining about problems to coworkers, which damages morale, and instead bring these complaints directly to me? And [can I] then hold [him] accountable?

A. If complaining adversely affects the work climate and productivity, then it is reasonable to ask your employee to come to you instead of complaining openly. You'll discover in your career that there are employees who like to "stir the pot," or, more accurately, they enjoy having others listen to their analysis and diagnosis of the work unit's problems. Ditto with the organization's or supervisor's competence. Much complaining is motivated simply by a desire to engage and socialize with coworkers. These complaints tend to act as icebreakers in conversations. It is easier to discuss a complaint or issue or open with a common concern than it is to offer an observation about the nice weather. This then becomes a habit of communication among employees. If needed, encourage the employee to visit the EAP, where he or she will find listening ears, and you can count on the discussion being one that helps the employee and supports the organization.

Q. I may be old school in my thinking, but I think an employee's mental health is none of the employer's business. Still, I see a lot of articles in recent years about mental wellness in the workplace. What is the business case for so much attention to this subject? What can one supervisor do?

A. Employers pay high costs for mental health problems. On the low side, it's about \$70 billion a year. Absenteeism, reduced productivity, and increased health care are the three big cost areas. If employers can influence mental wellness in ways that reduce these exposures, they can improve productivity and have a healthier bottom line. So mental wellness is not about intrusiveness in employees' lives but about creating work environments that have a positive impact on wellness. As a supervisor, you have significant influence on promoting mental wellness. Here are three examples. (1) Don't praise the employee who comes in early and stays late. This practice eventually erodes productivity and leads to burnout. (2) Encourage or insist that employees take regular vacations to recharge and refresh. (3) Don't expect employees to answer the phone, email, or engage in work around the clock. (4) Be a model for these behaviors yourself.