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SUPERVISOR

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I am sure some of my employees smoke marijuana after hours, off duty. I have never suspected anyone of smoking it at work or of being impaired, but could our company's higher-than-average accident rate be related to pot smoking, even if people are not coming to work high?

Hundreds of studies have demonstrated marijuana's adverse effect on behavior and performance. As a result, marijuana is a prohibited substance in virtually all drug-free workplace policies. What gets less discussion is the effect of marijuana withdrawal for heavy users. These withdrawal effects—observed by medical doctors, counselors, and researchers—include trouble sleeping, sweating, fatigue, mood swings, cravings, anger, insomnia, depression, and restlessness. Could these withdrawal effects contribute to an increased risk of accidents or lower productivity on the job? Indeed they can. For this reason, when conducting assessments with employees who are self-referred or referred by managers for performance issues, employee assistance professionals remain aware of signs and symptoms of substance abuse withdrawal. This is why an employee referral for a performance issue can lead to treatment for a drug or alcohol problem, even though the supervisor never witnessed any obvious symptoms of a substance abuse problem.

Do supervisors have any responsibility for helping employees manage anger in the workplace? Or is this a problem to address primarily by referring to the EAP? I see angry employees, and sometimes I step in because I worry about where anger might lead—for example, to a fight.

Witnessing displays of anger in the workplace is a common experience for supervisors. Although your employee assistance program is a key avenue of help for employees, your ability to properly intervene or positively influence angry employees is crucial. There is a financial and safety rationale for your role because it can prevent workplace altercations and conflicts that can lead to undesirable occurrences such as injuries, lawsuits, downtime, decline in morale, high turnover, and violence. Although you have no counseling role, you can practice effective communication with employees, understand and address their frustrations, empathize with their angry feelings, keep promises you make to them, and, of course, know when to make a referral to the EAP. As a person with authority, what you say can have a powerful effect. Don't minimize it. For example, say, "I understand your frustration" rather than "I am tired of hearing your gripes." Your EAP can help you acquire or improve upon these empathic and relational skills.

It seems like bullies in the workplace often have some type of power, even if only imagined. Is this correct? What is the supervisor's role in prevention, and should supervisors conduct training or education about this?

You're correct. Employees who bully often possess some degree of power—supervisory, tenure, delegated, indirect, or team leadership. Some bullies may perceive that or mistakenly believe they have power or authority, and this alone is enough to prompt their aggressive behavior. Obviously bullies can exist anywhere in the organization, so conducting general education and awareness is helpful. This should include self-assessment for the potential perpetrator or victim. Throw in a zero-tolerance policy toward bullying and a significant reduction of the risk can be accomplished. Supervisors should be aware that a bully is often a trusted employee who is relied upon by the immediate supervisor for knowledge, expertise, and skills. He or she can be passionate and loyal to the organization. Nevertheless, if a supervisor becomes overly dependent on this “right-hand man” relationship, bullying behaviors may emerge, aided by the special relationship the bully feels exists with the supervisor.

I once read that one of the most important jobs of a supervisor is helping every employee find his or her gift. What does this mean?

Much leadership literature is not about technical skills leaders must possess—documenting properly, resolving conflicts, praising, inspiring others, etc. Instead, it is about passion, values, self-awareness, having or developing a personal vision, integrity, wanting to teach others, and the desire to make a difference. With the personal awareness and energy that flow from these values and attributes, great supervisors demonstrate enthusiasm in helping subordinates discover their potential. This approach to supervision is positive and optimistic, and it is full of curiosity about what great things might lay hidden and undiscovered in the employees they supervise. This desire to invest in people and to champion their uniqueness is what separates great leaders from other managers, and it is easily spotted by those who hire and promote in great companies.

How can I hold employees accountable without making them feel that I am beating up on them or provoking them to get overly defensive?

Willingness to be personally accountable for one's life is learned, and it supports accountability in the workplace. However, you can have better success with holding employees to account if you have an effective relationship with them. Your view of accountability is important, so help your employees anticipate being held accountable. Always be sure there is no ambivalence about the results you expect. Some supervisors see accountability as a measure of “blameworthiness” when things go wrong. Do you approach your employees with this orientation? If so, you may also communicate less effectively and less frequently. Remember, you can make willingness to be accountable a performance measure. Then if issues remain, make a supervisor referral to the EAP.

