Common Supervisor Pitfalls

Supervisors, working with employees, are sometimes reluctant to involve the employee assistance counselor. Using the counselor as a resource can reduce supervisor anxiety and improve productivity as well as the general work environment. Listed below are some common pitfalls.

1. **OVERLY PROTECTIVE SUPERVISOR**
   Sometimes supervisors think that referring someone to the employee assistance counselor may label the employee as a problem. The purpose of the counseling is to help employees function better at work. The supervisor is often the first person who notices an employee with problems. Supervisors who offer referrals to the counseling services to their workers show that they care about the well-being of their employees.

2. **GOOD WORKER**
   Some supervisors shield employees because of past work performance. The supervisor thinks he/she could lose a “good worker” if a referral is made to counseling. These attitudes are unrealistic and unfair to the employee. Our common goal is to retain and support good employees.

3. **“IT’S MY PROBLEM, I’LL SOLVE IT”**
   Some supervisors believe it is their responsibility to handle and correct all problems in their area. Individuals with this perspective may view making a referral as an admission of personal failure. This can result in a needless delay in getting an employee help. Supervisors should consider the financial cost to the University, as well as, the personal liability they undertake by supporting an impaired employee.

4. **THE TIME EXCUSE**
   A supervisor may hope a problem will work itself out given enough time. In the case of a temporary crisis that may be true. However, delaying a referral may increase the severity of some problems including depression, anxiety, and alcohol or drug abuse.

5. **FEAR OF MAKING A MISTAKE**
   Supervisors who are uncertain about the source of a problem may fail to take action. The counselor can be helpful in planning a course of action.

6. **STEREOTYPES**
   Commonly held beliefs about alcoholism and mental illnesses, make supervisors reluctant to refer an employee for help. The stigma regarding these medical conditions can be overcome by education. The employee assistance counselor is a licensed mental health practitioner and can assess the problem, make referrals as necessary and educate employees about mental health issues.

7. **SUPERVISOR’S OWN PROBLEMS**
   Supervisors may experience similar problems to those confronting employees. A supervisor with personal problems may be uncomfortable making a referral to counseling.
Supervisor’s Role

Our common goal is to establish a work environment that is healthy and productive for all employees.

Observe
Employees very often will exhibit changes in behavior that indicate personal issues are causing problems. Here are some examples:

1. Frequent absences with vague excuses
2. Excessive use of sick days
3. Pattern on unscheduled vacations
4. Repeatedly coming to work late
5. Repeated unannounced, early departures from work
6. Taking unscheduled days off following a weekend, holiday, or vacation
7. Using up vacation days as soon as they are accrued
8. Frequent and/or prolonged unannounced absences during assigned work hours
9. Repeatedly missing scheduled staff functions or client related activities
10. Errors in judgment, which are inconsistent with past standards of good judgment
11. Difficult or failure to carry out routine instructions
12. Erratic or deteriorating quality of performance when compared with past performance
13. Overreacting to appropriate criticism
14. Manipulating co-workers to take over assigned responsibilities
15. Avoiding interaction with co-workers
16. Appearing withdrawn or overly preoccupied
17. Wide mood swings during the day for no apparent reason
18. An increase in personal telephone calls causing repeated work interruptions
19. Deteriorating hygiene or appearance
20. Complains by co-workers about employee’s erratic behavior or lack of work cooperation

Document
The supervisor should write down specific information regarding the problems. Complete and accurate documentation with enable a supervisor to:

1. Be objective, fair, and consistent.
2. Present factual and objective information that gives the employee a clear picture of their performance.
3. Prepare a written plan for action.

Prepare
Before meeting with your employee, discuss your observations and get support from your supervisor.

1. Meet and discuss with your immediate supervisor the date collected and formulate a plan to approach the employee.
2. Contact and discuss the situation with the employee assistance counselor for additional suggestions and support.
What to Do
1. Inform the employee of the purpose of the meeting.
2. Give the employee a copy of your documentation.
3. Be fair, firm, and clear about what the employee is expected to do.
4. Be a patient listener. Allow the employee the opportunity to explain their actions and what problems they are experiencing.
5. Get a commitment from the employee that they understand and accept the plan for improvement. Give them a copy of the plan.
6. Keep confidential any information the employee tells you about their personal problems.
7. Be consistent with workplace rules and regulations.
8. Set a reasonable date for a follow up meeting to review the employee’s progress.
9. Provide information about the employee assistance counseling. Inform the employee on how they can schedule an appointment.
10. Inform the employee that they have the ultimate responsibility for the improvement.

What Not to Do
1. Don’t try to diagnose a personal or drug/alcohol problem.
2. Do not preach, lecture, or “brow beat”.
3. Do not be a manipulator.
4. Don’t judge or moralize.
5. Don’t threaten disciplinary action, unless there will be follow through.
6. Don’t engage in rumors; deal only in facts.
7. Don’t be diverted from the purpose of the meeting by arguing.
8. Don’t accept excuses or alibis.
9. Don’t engage in talk about the activities of other employees.
10. Don’t set up unreasonable goals for improvement. It took time for the problem to develop and it will take time to correct.

Follow Up
Schedule a follow up meeting within 2 to 4 weeks after the initial meeting. During the interim, continue to observe and document. Follow up meetings with employees are important because they enable both parties to assess improvement or lack of improvement. The outcome of a second meeting may be that no further meetings are needed or that subsequent ones would be useful.

Conclusion
The purpose of confronting an employee is to develop a positive plan of action for improvement. Good observation can result in early identification of problems. This provides the employee and supervisor with the maximum number of alternatives.