Q. What are the goals of an EAP when an employee seeks help?

A. EAPs have four primary goals in working with employees. These goals include:
1) identifying employees whose personal problems have the potential to adversely affect job performance;
2) assessing the problems of employees, determining what resources are necessary to help them, and establishing a plan of action to access resources or services;
3) motivating employees to seek and accept appropriate help; and
4) helping employees get the services they need.
To accomplish these goals, employee assistance professionals may use many strategies. Follow-up is important to ensure that employees don't face unnecessary roadblocks or lose motivation in imple-menting action plans. When supervisors and employees understand these goals, they are more likely to use EAPs, and less likely to decide who can and cannot be helped.

SPECIAL EDITION: Common questions and answers about the EAP

Q. For many reasons, some supervisors are reluctant to confront employees and refer them to the EAP. What can influence supervisors and motivate them to make better use of the EAP?

A. Initially, when an EAP is installed; supervisors may have difficulty incorporating it in their supervision practices. Preventing these problems is what makes supervisor training so important. Fortunately, most supervisors learn quickly that an EAP makes the job of managing employees easier. Other supervisors who are more reluctant can be helped to see the value of the EAP by observing next-level managers incorporating the program in their own supervision practices. This modeling has a powerful influence. More powerful still is holding supervisors accountable for using the EAP to manage their employees' performance and conduct problems. For example, an organization may consider effective use of the EAP by supervisors' in their annual reviews or evaluations. EAPs save money and improve productivity, which provides a rationale for this accountability.

Q. Why should supervisors not attempt to make any distinction as to what type of performance problem justifies a supervisor referral to the EAP? I can think of a few poor performers who I know had no personal problems in need of EAP services.

A. All supervisor referrals to an EAP should be based upon performance. And any employee with a performance problem should be referred to an EAP if the supervisor's attempts to correct it are not successful. These two foundation principles of referral to employee assistance programs are based upon key observations in intervening with troubled employees. First, some types of health conditions and personal problems cannot be self-diagnosed or identified by others without specific knowledge and interviewing skills. Second, awareness of some personal problems stay hidden from the victim and others by denial and other defense mechanisms or lack of awareness that completely mask the existence of the illness. Examples include many health and mental health conditions in early stages or their less acute form that only a trained clinician could identify.

Q. I made a supervisor referral of my employee to the EAP, but only in writing. I have not discussed the referral in person with him. Should I meet with him, too? I think he knows what he needs to do.

A. Although you put your supervisor referral in writing, you should also meet with your employee to discuss it. Such a discussion will increase the likelihood of your employee accepting the referral. Remind your employee that use of the EAP is confidential and that the EA professional will not disclose confidential information to you. Also remind the employee that use of the EAP will not jeopardize job security or promotional opportunities. These are standard elements in virtually all EAP policies, and they are issues of concern to employees that prevent follow-through with supervisor referrals. Indeed, most employees are not aware of, or may not remember, the provisions established by the organization's EAP policy. Provide a brochure of the EAP if you have one, the EAP phone number, and the name of the EA professional.

Q. My employee has severe performance problems. I hesitate to refer her to the EAP because I fear the EAP might discover some personal problem that makes us feel our hands are tied. This could interfere with our ability to dismiss her. What should I do?

A. Although you do not say how long the performance problems have continued, it is not unusual for supervisors to consider the EAP role only at the point at which they are ready to dismiss an employee. Any delay or interference with the goal to dismiss becomes undesirable. The EAP will not disclose to you the nature of your employee's personal problems, if any exist. Regardless, EAPs cannot interfere with administrative decisions of the organization. It is possible that the EAP may salvage your employee. This will cause you concern if you have already made a decision to dismiss her. As a result, you will feel torn between allowing the EAP process to continue and moving forward with her dismissal. This is a common dilemma for supervisors who have not made supervisor referrals early, when performance problems were less severe. This frustration often leads supervisors to think that the EAP got in their way, even though it is they who have placed themselves in this position. If you intend to dismiss, then you are not interested in the EAP's attempt to return the employee to full productivity. **Refer early!**

Q. Is there a time-tested way to help employees resolve conflict - perhaps a formula or a "do it yourself" approach? If such an approach did not work, then I could make an EAP referral.

A. The following popular approach is designed to build empathy between two employees and motivate change. Each employee switches off, answering these questions or following the directions given: 1) What is one thing that person X does that causes you difficulty? (Each person restates the other person's answer to this question in his or her own words.) 2) What is it that you would like person X to do differently? (Each person restates the other person's answer to this question in his or her own words. 3) Ask the two employees to work toward a written agreement. Most effective approaches to conflict resolution include an expectation by the supervisor or manager that the conflict be resolved, effective discussion between two employees that creates empathy for the other employee's position, and a commitment by both parties to an agreement and new rules that will minimize future conflict.

Q. My documentation of employee performance has been criticized for not being effective enough to support administrative actions I have proposed. What are some of the most common problems with supervisor documentation?

A. The most common problems with supervisor documentation include: 1) The documentation lacks specifics. Example: "The employee regularly has poor attendance." Better: "Eight days of work were missed between March 3rd and March 20th." 2) The documentation includes emotional, subjective, or distracting language. Example: "The employee can't be trusted, takes advantage of everyone, and thinks he's better than others, etc." Better: "The employee took five unauthorized breaks last week, which burdened coworkers and their work schedules, causing major disruptions." 3) The documentation discusses performance problems, but the employee has not been made aware of the specific events contained in the documentation.

If you would like more information, please call our office at (850) 431-5190 or toll free at (877) 501-0956.