

How to counsel employees who have personal problems

At one time or another, most employees you manage will have personal problems that hinder their job performance. Often, the problems aren't serious and employees can quickly return to normal productivity.

But in some cases, deeper personal problems can cause long-time, productive employees to suddenly underperform, become tardy or react differently to co-workers.

This is relatively common: 10 percent to 20 percent of employees have personal problems that reduce their productivity by up to 25 percent, according to the U.S. Labor Department.

In such situations, you need to analyze the problem and meet with the worker. But it's vital that you talk with those employees in the right way. Why? You don't want to offend or embarrass the employee, nor do you want to spark a complaint or a lawsuit.

A lawsuit is possible because the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) covers employees with "perceived disabilities" as well as real ones. So if you say the wrong thing to an employee ("I can see you've got psychological problems") and then fire him or her, that employee could file an ADA lawsuit, saying the organization perceived his or her mental disability and should have accommodated it.

6 steps to effective interaction

Use this process to identify and confront employees with personal problems:

- 1. Stay alert to signs.** To determine if it's a personal problem rather than a skill deficit or bad attitude, your main clue is the employee's history. A solid staffer whose performance turns iffy may have suffered a shift in attitude or run into a personal problem. (*See list below for telltale signs.*)
- 2. Document the performance problem.** You should do this anyway, but in the case of a personal problem, documentation can help alert the troubled employee to the harm his or her problem is inflicting on the organization. Plus, your notes lay down a record to help defend your decisions in case of a later complaint.
- 3. Meet to discuss the poor performance and/or policy violations.** You don't need to confront the employee at the first sign of trouble, but don't wait until his or her job record has been seriously damaged.

At the meeting, use concrete examples to point out performance problems. Ask what's causing the problems without referring to health or emotional behavior. It's OK to say: "I see a change in your work behavior. I'm not asking about your personal situation, but we, as a company, care about you."

- 4. Focus on work-related facts.** The issue is work performance, not a divorce or a son's schoolwork. Avoid focusing on personal problems, and gently remind employees that they're responsible for the work, regardless of what's going on at home.

Also, don't characterize the employee's physical or emotional state with comments like: "You don't seem well emotionally," "You look depressed" or "You seem drunk." (ADA covers depression and alcoholism, and an employee fired for poor performance could sue, claiming the firing resulted from a falsely perceived disability.)

5. Describe the consequences. Explain that the performance problem could lead to the loss of a promotion, at the least, or even the job itself. Provide a description of how the employee's performance must improve to be considered acceptable.

6. Don't become too sympathetic to the person's problem. That could lead you to say something like: "Don't worry about your job; it's safe." A statement like that could provide evidence if the employee is later fired and sues.

Even if you suspect the employee is depressed or is an alcoholic, you're not a therapist. Keep everything within the business context. Refer the person to HR or to the employee assistance program.

10 signs of a troubled employee

1. Tardiness
2. Excessive absenteeism
3. Pattern absenteeism (Fridays, Mondays, etc.)
4. Changes in co-worker relationships
5. More time on phone with family
6. Outward anxiety or stress
7. Tearfulness
8. Defensive behavior
9. Irritability
10. Emotional outbursts.

Use the right words when pointing people to employee assistance programs

An employee assistance program (EAP) is an employee benefit available through many group health plans that helps employees deal with issues such as depression, family crises (divorce, death, etc.), alcoholism, drug addiction, teen problems and suicide prevention. EAP counselors, typically by phone, will either handle the problem or refer employees to the appropriate local providers.

When you mention to employees that the company has an EAP service, do so in a generic and consistent manner. Say something like: "I want to let you know that we have trained professionals available to assist employees in a wide range of areas, including family problems, illnesses, elder care, finances, depression, drug addiction and more. Here's how to contact them ..." Leave it up to the employee to contact the EAP.

That approach informs the employee without singling out a specific problem. Never say anything such as, "The EAP has good drug counselors" or "Mike was depressed and the EAP really helped him."

Note: If an employee seems unable to stop talking about her problem after she's opened up to you, say

something like: "Laura, you're giving me too much personal information. I care about you, but I'm not your best resource. Remember, we have an EAP to help us at times like this. I'm sure they'll be able to help you better than I could."