How to Refer an Employee to the Employee Assistance Program

Referring an employee to the employee assistance program (EAP) allows you to fulfill your responsibilities as a manager while a trained professional provides assistance to the employee. You are helping the employee get the help needed. The referral may be to provide assistance to an employee who is having personal problems, to address problems affecting performance, or as part of a performance plan. In this article, you’ll learn when and how to refer an employee to the EAP.

Examples of when to refer an employee to the EAP
The EAP is one of the most effective tools you have available to you to help employees with personal issues, performance issues, and other issues in the workplace. Here are examples of when you might refer an employee to the EAP:

• When an employee is experiencing symptoms of stress. The employee may exhibit some of these signs: headaches, stomachaches, irritability, difficulty concentrating, memory problems.

• When an employee seems to be suffering from depression. The employee may exhibit some of these signs: a drop in productivity, increased absences, loss of energy, memory difficulties, unprovoked outbursts of anger, or making more mistakes than usual.

• When an employee is having personal problems. The employee may exhibit some of these signs: a change in work behavior, including missed deadlines or unusual mistakes; forgetfulness or poor concentration; an increased number of personal calls; moodiness; uncharacteristic outbursts of anger; doesn’t seem like the same person he or she once was.

• When you suspect a substance abuse problem. The employee may exhibit some of these signs: decline in quality of work or productivity, returning late from lunch or breaks, accidents on or off the job, problems with co-workers, increased irritability, or taking an excessive number of sick days.

• When an employee is having performance issues. The EAP can provide assistance to both employees and managers when personal or work issues are affecting performance.

Voluntary or self-referrals
Most employees seek assistance from the EAP on their own -- for help with personal or family issues, work issues, and other concerns. This is called a voluntary or self-referral. Employees may contact the program at any time.
can encourage employees to seek help from the EAP by providing them with the program telephone number and contact information. Remind employees that the EAP is free and confidential.

**Informal referrals**
Managers sometimes informally refer an employee to the EAP. Again, this is on a voluntary basis. For example, an employee with a good or an excellent performance record may be experiencing problems outside of work. The employee may be caring for a sick relative, for example, or be going through a separation or divorce. An informal referral is a reminder or suggestion to the employee that the EAP is available to help. You are encouraging the employee to make use of the program because you are concerned. Give the employee the telephone number of the program and the e-mail contact information. Remind the employee that the EAP is free and confidential.

An informal referral to the EAP may also be used in cases involving work performance issues. Often, performance problems are the result of personal issues outside of work. With this type of referral, a manager or supervisor identifies the performance issue and reminds the employee that the EAP is available as a resource to help with personal issues that may be affecting performance. It is not your job to diagnose employee problems. That is what the EAP is for. Your job is to strongly suggest that the employee contact the EAP.

**What to say when making an informal referral to the EAP**
Here is what you might say to the employee when making an informal referral to the EAP:

- “I'm really sorry you are going through a difficult time.”
- “I'd like to let you know that you do have a resource -- a benefit through work -- that you can use to get support and help.” Remind the employee that the EAP is free and confidential.
- “Here is how to contact the EAP.” Give the employee the telephone number of the program and the e-mail contact information.

**Formal referrals**
In some cases, managers formally refer employees to the EAP. A formal referral is used in cases where the employee’s job may be in jeopardy because of a performance issue, attendance issue, or behavior issue at work. The manager documents that he or she referred the employee to the EAP.
Steps to take when making a formal referral

1. Contact your human resources (HR) representative to learn about your organization’s policies and procedures. This is especially important to do if you are handling a difficult workplace issue.

2. Contact a management line consultant through your EAP before making a formal referral. To reach a management line consultant, call the toll-free number or e-mail a consultant. Be sure to do this before you sit down to meet with the employee. That way, the management line consultant knows what your concerns are about the employee and is better able to offer help when the employee calls.

What to say when making a formal referral to the EAP

A management line consultant will walk you through the steps of what to say and what to do when making a formal referral to the EAP because of work and performance issues. You will want to schedule a time to meet with the employee in a private place. Your conversation with the employee might go something like this:

- **Express concern to the employee about continued productivity issues.** You might say, “I’m concerned about your performance. You missed two important deadlines this month. If your performance does not show improvement, you are in danger of losing your job.”

- **Explain that the EAP is available to assist the employee with work-related issues.** You might say, “The EAP can assist you with performance or behavior issues. I suggest you contact the EAP and use the resources available to you to address any issues that may be affecting your work performance.”

- **Emphasize that the performance issues must be resolved.** You might say, “Whether you call the EAP or not is up to you. However, I’m concerned that these performance issues get resolved. Your employment will be based on your improvement. If these issues are not corrected, I will have no choice but to take further action.”

Mandatory referrals

If you decide to require that your employee consult with your company’s EAP, you are making what is called a mandatory referral. You must document that you referred the employee to the EAP and must follow specific steps both before and after making a mandatory referral to protect yourself and your company from legal action. Such a referral gives your employee a date by which he must seek the help of a trained professional at the EAP. His obligation to call may be a condition of his continued employment. This type of referral is appropriate only for documented, on-the-job performance issues or violations of company policy; it is not appropriate if you sense that an employee is under stress and you decide he needs help.
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Contact your HR department and EAP for more information on mandatory referrals.

Finally, whether you are making an informal or a formal referral to the EAP, don’t avoid a problem or assume it will go away on its own. The sooner you encourage an employee who needs it to seek help, the better off you will be. The EAP is a valuable resource for addressing personal and work issues that may be affecting individual and group performance.

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