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Poor job performance or unsatisfactory quality of work is obviously the number one issue with troubled employees. Beyond this, what is the most common problem among troubled employees, and how should supervisors respond?

The management research firm Center for Creative Leadership surveyed over 200 supervisors and discovered that the most common employee problem (other than poor job performance) is “inability to get along with others.” Conflict and friction between two employees are not uncommon, but beware of employees who (1) blame others for their problems, (2) make others feel guilty for not living up to their expectations, (3) show an inability to own “their half” of problems, (4) have little insight into their behavior, (5) view discussions about their behavior as personal attacks, and (6) are overly adept at making excuses. These behaviors in combination are unlikely to respond to a corrective interview with you. Making an early referral to the EAP along with well-written documentation is recommended. (If you need help with constructing effective documentation, consult with your HR and / or the EAP.)

I referred my employee to the EAP this morning because of his attendance issues. When he comes back to the office this afternoon, should I meet with him again? Or should I assume everything is fine, wait for the EAP to confirm his attendance, or discuss with him the expectations going forward?

If your employee went to the EAP and you previously had contact with the program in arranging the referral, you should get confirmation of participation if a release was signed. Regardless, meet with your employee and discuss the essential duties of his position, the reasons for the referral, and your expectations for his attendance. Doing so will increase the likelihood of having fewer or no more attendance problems. Then meet a few times over the ensuing weeks and months. This will further reinforce his need to follow through both with the EAP’s recommendations and with his commitment to a predictable attendance schedule. Lack of accountability and supervisor follow-up demotivates employees, causing their commitment to change to erode. The time you invest in reminding him and praising his return to proper performance standards will be well worth it.

Can I direct an employee to stop complaining about problems to coworkers, which damages morale, and instead bring these complaints directly to me? And [can I] then hold [him] accountable?

If the complaining adversely affects the work climate and productivity, then it is reasonable to ask your employee to come to you instead of complaining openly. You’ll discover in your career that there are employees who like to “stir the pot,” or, more accurately, they enjoy having others listen to their analysis and diagnosis of the work unit’s problems. Complaining can be motivated simply by a desire to engage and socialize with one’s coworkers. These complaints can act as icebreakers and a common topic of daily communication among employees. If needed, encourage the employee to visit the EAP, where he or she will find listening ears, and you can count on the discussion being one that helps the employee and supports the organization.