My employee had severe performance issues eight or nine years ago. We almost terminated him, but he was referred to the EAP and entered treatment for alcoholism. Things have been great, but unfortunately, I was told he was drinking at a holiday party recently. Should I be concerned?

What is a fear-based workplace? Do I work within one, and how can I make a difference to improve the work environment for my employees?

You are reporting that your employee's performance is acceptable and that you have no concerns after so many years. Nevertheless, it appears he has relapsed. You should monitor his performance as you always have, and if problems return, engage the EAP and follow the supervisor referral process recommended to you. There is no other action for you to take unless an active follow-up program is continuing with the EAP. It would then be appropriate to inform the EAP. Performance and ability to perform the position's essential functions are the dominant concerns of the employer. Failure by your employee to manage his disease properly is a personal and medical concern for the moment. It is possible that the relapse will not affect his performance again, or problems could return in a spectacular fashion. Your vigilance as a supervisor will help you intervene early if needed to protect the investment you have in this worker.

A fear-based workplace is one marked by significant anxiety, insecurity, and trepidation by employees whose productivity is a result of motivation driven by fear, rather than what they might gain or achieve. Fear-based workplaces are usually characterized by toxic relationships that flourish, with drama, infighting, turf wars, and warring over resources, money, or power. Most workplaces don't remain fear-based very long before a crisis erupts and opportunity for change appears. At the supervisory level, you can prevent the birth of a fear-based workplace by 1) encouraging work-life balance; 2) keeping open communication among employees to help shut down rumors; 3) encouraging collaboration among employees; 4) not making everyone only “live by the numbers,” but also recognizing humanistic and intangible forms of success; 5) encouraging information sharing and decision making; and 6) communicating with the ranks. Don't make decisions mysteriously in unexplained closed-door meetings.

I was reprimanded for telling my employee who is 69 that he looked really good for his age. I was told this was an example

The workplace is not a social setting like a backyard barbecue. It is a place of employment and governed by federal and state laws. Many of these laws apply to different types of employment discrimination, with age being one of them. While such a statement might be interpreted as a compliment in a private social setting, it has potential risk for your employer. Regardless of intent, your statement could be construed to mean that the employer pre-
of ageism. I don’t see how. I’ve been in many social situations where a statement like this is flattering and a compliment. What’s the problem?

What role should supervisors play in helping employees deal with their emotions and cope with stress? I don’t want to take a “hands-off, not my problem” approach, nor do I want to refer everyone to the EAP for everyday stress issues.

Today’s workplace has changed. Employees are much more desirous of positive, nurturing, and socially connected environments. This is especially true of younger workers, who also appreciate supervisors who are willing to be more vulnerable and open about their feelings with them. Given these new expectations and to help retain employees longer, offering guidance on coping with work stress is appropriate for supervisors. This can include, for example, counseling employees about taking risks, managing fear and work stress, coping with mistakes, not regretting missed opportunities, and overcoming fear of taking chances, as well as supervisors sharing information about their personal failures and successes. These things help employees build “emotional resilience” to better cope with errors, mistakes, work crises, coworker conflicts, disappointments, missed promotions, upsetting performance reviews, and more. All organizations want lower turnover, and helping employees build emotional resilience clearly has a business rationale. Caution: Do separate the above skills from acute issues and the need for professional counseling suitable for the EAP.

New research on taking breaks at work was recently conducted by Baylor University. The findings were the first of their kind, focusing on why work breaks are valuable, what time to take breaks, the best type of work break to take, what to do during a work break, and the physical and mental health benefits of taking breaks. Key findings include that it is better to take a work break mid-morning, before fatigue is experienced. This replenishes resources—energy, concentration, and motivation—more successfully than breaks taken at any other time of day. The later a break comes in the day, the less effective it will be. The best breaks are the ones where employees do something they enjoy, and this could be work-related! There is no evidence that nonwork-related activities are more beneficial. Better breaks produce better mental health and increased job satisfaction. Now you have reasons to encourage taking breaks.

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