



This section is set up to provide a ready-made Brown Bag Session for you to use with employees and/or managers. Use as is, or adapt this information for a general employee group. You may reproduce as many copies as needed.

What about Bob? Assisting Management, including a Referral

Editor's note: *This issue's Brown Bagger insert is designed as an example of a management consultation, including tips on how to help management make a referral to the EAP. Consider how **you** might adapt it in your own practice when consulting with a manager who is struggling to talk with an employee, he either feels sorry for or does not know how to refer to the EAP for help.*

By Leah Szemborski, Ascension WI EAP

Bob is usually an upbeat, hardworking employee. He's been with the company a long time and has an excellent attendance record. Lately Bob has been coming in to work late about 2-3 times a week. Also, Bob doesn't look so good. Sometimes his hair is disheveled, and he has bags under his eyes.

Everyone knows Bob is going through a nasty divorce. His work performance has been a bit shaky, but he's such a great guy and everyone feels bad for him, so no one says anything. More recently it's gotten even worse. Bob has come into work smelling like alcohol on a few occasions.

What's up with Bob?

In the past Bob has been so easy going and laid back; now people walk on eggshells around him because he is so irritable. Based on this case example, what can you determine about Bob?

- A. Bob is probably an alcoholic.
- B. Bob is probably depressed.
- C. Bob is just going through a hard time.
- D. Bob probably needs substance abuse or mental health counseling.

The answer is.... none of the above! Unless you have formal training in mental health or substance abuse assessment it is not appropriate to make any of these determinations. The good news is that, as you are aware, Employee Assistance Program counselors ARE trained to

make these determinations and can make recommendations regarding appropriate treatment or action steps.

Bob's Supervisor; the 'Sometimes Speech'

So, what did Bob's supervisor do? The supervisor pulled Bob aside and gave him the "sometimes speech." It went something like this:

"Bob, you've been a great employee here for a long time. Lately, though, I've become increasingly concerned about you. I've noticed that some days it looks like you haven't showered or shaved, and you've been making a lot more errors in your work lately."

"Sometimes issues like these are a result of personal issues or concerns. That may or may not be true for you. It is your choice to tell me about those things or not--it's your business, but I want you to know that I do care.

"If it is true that you're dealing with some personal stuff, we have these resources: The EAP is a free and confidential counseling service. Have you heard of it? I will never know if you use the service, that is between you and them.

"Whether or not you choose to use the resources I've offered, the bottom line is that your work needs to improve. I need you to be showered when you come to work, never use alcohol or other substances before work, and check for errors before you submit reports."

A sometimes speech like this is a great way to start a conversation in a compassionate way, but also hold people accountable. A good sometimes speech has four components:

- Acknowledges there's a problem;
- Offers a safe space and a lot of compassion;
- Provides resources; and
- Sets expectations.

EXERCISE: *Have you worked with a manager or supervisor who has used a “sometimes speech”? Was it similar to this example? How did it differ?*

Other Suggestions for EA Professionals

Here are some additional suggestions for supervisors to help a conversation like this go smoothly:

- Remind them that the employee may never disclose a problem — and that is their right.
- Stress that they must not ask the employee questions about their mental health, diagnosis, etc., but do LISTEN if they want to share.
- When talking with an employee, focus on behaviors that are causing a disruption in the workplace or interfering with productivity.
- When having conversations about productivity and work performance, it’s ok to ask questions with a “help me understand” attitude—just don’t pry!

EXERCISE: *What other recommendations might YOU have for a manager or supervisor who is struggling to talk to a troubled employee?*

Getting Back to Bob

Let’s get back to Bob. After the sometimes speech Bob’s work performance did not improve much. Bob’s supervisor decided to implement corrective action (with HR involvement, of course) and stipulated that Bob make an appointment with an EAP counselor by the end of the week. Bob must also “follow counselor recommendations.”

Isn’t that kind of harsh? Many people believe that putting someone on corrective action when they are already struggling is unkind and punitive. The truth is that the workplace has a unique opportunity to intervene in a way that no one else does. Many people are not motivated to change until something terrible happens or the pain becomes too much.

By intervening in the only manner the workplace can – *holding the individual accountable to work performance standards* – you are offering tough love that, more often than not, will motivate the person to at least see the EAP counselor, and in most cases receive help and guidance that they didn’t even realize they needed. Corrective action might be the kindest thing you can do for someone who is struggling.

Meeting with the EAP

Bob met with an EAP counselor who assessed Bob’s concerns. Together they decided on a course of action.

Bob signed a release of information stating that the counselor could share with his supervisor that he had come to the appointment and that work goals were in place. All personal information was kept private.

When the counselor called the supervisor for an update, the supervisor asked if Bob is an alcoholic or depressed. The counselor explained that both of those issues are irrelevant to the workplace, and the bottom line is that the supervisor could expect

Bob’s work performance to improve. If it doesn’t, however, the supervisor should call EAP.

After a few weeks Bob’s work performance began to improve. After several months Bob seemed back to normal, and the supervisor agreed that his work performance had improved. Bob still calls his EAP counselor once in a while for support when he needs it.

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Advice on Starting Conversations

Here are a few more tips to open conversations about mental health in *your own* workplace:

- ❖ **Provide a safe space to talk.** Some people find it difficult to talk about their mental health, so keep an open mind and refrain from sharing your opinions and beliefs. Ask simple questions about their experiences and support they may need.

- ❖ **Ensure confidentiality.** Sensitive information should be shared with as few people as possible. Discuss with the individual what information they would like shared and with whom—if anyone. As an EAP counselor, you are aware of this – but remember the employee may not and might be very skeptical!

- ❖ **Be flexible.** Focus on the person, not the problem. Involve them in finding solutions to any work-related difficulties. Remember that effective

workplace adjustments are often simple and inexpensive. Be creative and keep an open mind.

- ❖ **Be honest and clear.** If you have specific concerns such as poor attitude or work performance problems, address them early. Be direct and honest, but also compassionate and concerned.

- ❖ **Seek advice and support.** In order to help and care for others, you need to be healthy yourself and of sound mind. Follow your own advice and strive to live a healthy lifestyle with plenty of support from others.

EXERCISE: *What suggestion(s) might you add when discussing mental health in the workplace?*

Summary

Sometimes associates may have personal or work-related concerns that impact their ability to do their job. When **one** person’s work performance suffers, the **entire** work group can be negatively impacted.

This Brown Bagger has been offered for supervisors considering using the Employee Assistance Program as a resource in getting a problem employee back on track. ■

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Recognize the Problem, Start the Referral

Recognizing that there is a problem in the workplace may seem obvious, but there are many reasons why a problem may not be acknowledged or addressed.

Sometimes the supervisor doesn't know how to handle work performance problems or negative work culture, so they do nothing.

Other times leaders may overreact using harsh, punitive measures to correct behavior.

Employee Assistance Professionals are there for support, as well as help employees address any personal concerns that may be impacting their work.

Starting a Referral

When a supervisor makes a formal referral (also called a mandatory or supervisory referral) to the EAP, it is always necessary to get approval from the Human Resources department. Once it has been decided that an employee will be put on corrective action, you should contact EAP to notify them that the referral is taking place.

Please note, it is best when this is done before you speak to the employee so EAP staff are prepared when the employee calls, and to answer any questions you may have about the process. EAP intake staff will want to know why the referral is being made, what changes the employee is expected to make, and the deadline for making the EAP appointment. It is the employee's responsibility to call and make an appointment.

Notes about Confidentiality

The employer may feel free to share information about an employee's work



performance as EAP staff will always keep that information confidential, however; counseling ethics and confidentiality laws *prohibit the counselor from exchanging information with the supervisor without the employee's consent.*

EAP is Always Voluntary

EAP is voluntary, and no one can be forced to participate. Neither does EAP administer any type of discipline. The Employee Assistance Program is available to support, coach, and guide employees to make positive changes. If the employee's job performance does not improve, the manager or supervisor should resort to normal corrective action procedures. ■

Source: Ascension WI EAP.