Using the Employee Assistance Program

HANDBOOK FOR SUPERVISORS

MCPS

ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Employee Assistance Program

Employee Assistance Program

45 W. Gude Drive, Suite 1300
Rockville, MD 20850

Phone:
  240-314-1040

Fax:
  301-251-5213

Website:
  www.montgomeryschoolsmd/departments/eap

EAP Specialists:
  Jennifer Alfonso
  Jeffrey Becker
  Robyn Rosenbauer

Secretary:
  Ana Teran

Using the Employee Assistance Program to Address Work Performance Problems

One of the most interesting and complicated parts of being a supervisor is dealing with employees as human beings. Problems come up more often than many people admit. You, as the supervisor, are the one who must handle work performance problems—the absenteeism, the mistakes, the conflicts, and the deteriorating performance. And you are instrumental in making and carrying out the difficult decisions that can lead to discipline or termination of a once-valued employee.

By providing an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), MCPS offers an opportunity to help troubled employees. This handbook summarizes how to use the EAP to the best advantage of everyone— MCPS, your employees, you, and, ultimately, the students.

Solving Work Performance Problems

A portion of any labor force is experiencing personal problems at any one time. Such problems develop at all levels of the workforce—no one is immune from personal difficulties. Troubled employees may suffer from anxiety, depression, confusion, low self-esteem and other stressors. Their problems affect their families, their friends, their work situations, and their supervisors. The EAP gives employees a chance to get professional assistance in addressing their problems and needs, and it gives supervisors a wider range of possibilities before disciplinary action or termination is necessary. Intelligent use of the EAP is the key to its success.

The EAP

All MCPS employees, their immediate family members and dependents, and MCPS retirees may use this free service. The EAP offers assessment, short-term counseling, referral to resources in the community, and crisis response. The EAP can help with—

- Job-related problems
- Couple and family problems
- Managing work and family
- Emotional problems
- Financial problems
- Alcohol and other drug abuse

- Stress or life crises
- Grief and loss
- Domestic violence

Self-Referrals

Most employees or family members contact the EAP on their own. They want help with problems and see the benefits of using professional services. All employees, including administrators and other supervisors, may use the EAP.

Administrative/Supervisory Referrals

The following is a guide to help you determine when to make a referral. There are two types of administrative/supervisory referrals:

Informal Referral: If an employee needs help in dealing with a personal problem that has not begun to affect work performance, acknowledge the employee's concerns and suggest that he/she call the EAP for assistance. We recommend when making an informal referral that you provide the employee with an EAP brochure, which is available by calling the EAP office. Whether or not the employee accesses the EAP is totally voluntary and, unless the employee specifically requests it, the supervisor does not get feedback from the EAP regarding the employee's follow-through.

Formal Referral: A formal EAP referral is recommended when the supervisor has observed a pattern of employee work performance deterioration. The following are examples of situations when you may want to consider making a formal referral:

- The employee's work performance is deteriorating.
- You have begun to document performance problems.
- The employee has acknowledged a drug or alcohol problem.
- The employee is in danger of disciplinary action if work performance does not improve.
- The employee has threatened to hurt him/herself, hurt someone else, or damage property.
- The employee is demonstrating behavior that could create an unsafe workplace.

If you are uncertain whether an EAP referral is appropriate, you may call the EAP for consultation. The counselor will assist you in planning for a conference with the employee, during which you will discuss your concerns in specific behavioral terms, focus on specific areas and time frames for improvement, and refer the employee to the EAP.

ODIR: Observe, Document, Inform, Refer

We recommend utilizing the "ODIR" process for formal EAP referrals. ODIR stands for observe, document, inform, and refer. ODIR clarifies for employees what supervisors' expectations are and helps to hold them accountable. ODIR recognizes that the employee's work performance issues might be the result of personal issues in need of attention. A supervisor who follows the ODIR process can be the employee's strongest motivator for change. During this process, the supervisor observes the employee's work performance, documents the work performance problems, informs the employee of the poor performance and the expectation for improvement, and refers the employee to the EAP. If at any point during the process, the supervisor considers disciplinary action to address the work performance problems, it is recommended that he/she consult with the Office of Human Resources and Development (OHRD).

Observe

The first step for the supervisor is observation. Unsatisfactory or deteriorating work often takes these forms:

- Inconsistent productivity
- Wide variation in quality of work
- Poor attendance or absences during the workday
- Frequent lateness
- Excessive sick leave
- Neglectful attitudes toward assignments and deadlines
- Moodiness and irritability
- Blaming others
- Avoidance of co-workers and principal or supervisor

Single incidents do not typically warrant concern. A pattern of deteriorating performance, however, indicates a need for intervention. It is best to catch problems as early as possible. Patterns of Job Performance Deterioration (page 5), may help you focus your thoughts and observations.

Document

Documenting employee performance problems assists the supervisor in recognizing when a problem has become enough of an issue to confront. If you keep track of dates, times, and problems that arise, you are able to provide the employee with accurate feedback about his/her performance. Begin documentation when an employee first demonstrates poor performance. Document the observable, measurable facts. Write down the specifics—the exact days and times an employee was absent or late, examples of poor productivity, errors, etc. Include the date, time, place, and nature of the incident and the names of any other persons involved. Documentation clarifies the situation for you and for the records. It helps you communicate specifics to the employee and facilitates discussion. It also provides you with legal protection should a situation result in a grievance or arbitration. Remember to ensure that all information is treated confidentially.

What To Document

- Any decline in work performance: missed deadlines; inability to work cooperatively with co-workers, students, or parents; frequent accidents.
- Attendance records: absenteeism, frequent questionable excuses, tardiness, frequent abuse of breaks and lunch period.
- Poor interpersonal skills in dealing with you, colleagues, or customers.

Inform

As a supervisor, productivity and job performance are your main concerns. When faced with performance problems, your challenge is to seek performance improvement and to remain objective. When preparing for the conference do the following:

- Consult with OHRD, if necessary, and be familiar with personnel policies and disciplinary procedures.
- Meet with the employee as soon as an established pattern has developed.
- Arrange to have the discussion in a private office or conference room, with the door closed.
- Plan in advance the structure and goals of the meeting.
- Focus on declining job performance and behavior, not the person or his/her personal problems.

Summarize the discussion and plan to follow up on improvement/progress at appropriate, regular intervals. Use your documentation to structure your feedback to the employee.

During the Discussion

- Focus solely on declining job performance and the offer of help.
- Have your written documentation on hand, so you can "let the record speak for itself."
- Maintain a firm yet considerate attitude. Casual conversation will lessen the impact of your message.
- If the employee denies having a problem, review the documentation citing specific incidents. Stick to work performance.
- Indicate your belief that poor job performance could be caused by personal problems, but be sure not to diagnose or discuss the personal problems.
- Inform the employee of the importance of improving performance and the consequences of it not improving.
- Explain that help is available through the EAP if personal issues might be contributing to the performance problems.

Following the Discussion

Keep a record of the conference and of any others that follow. Notify your supervisor, and OHRD if appropriate, of your discussion with the employee.

Refer

A referral to the EAP is recommended as part of your conference with the employee. The EAP can help the employee with personal or work-related issues that might be at the root of his/her work performance problems. Employees' use of the EAP is voluntary and is not entered in work records. It in no way jeopardizes job security. Confidentiality is maintained regarding voluntary use of the program and the nature of any problems. If there is a formal referral, the employee is asked to sign a release of information to allow the EAP to inform you whether he/she made and kept the initial appointment. The information given to you is limited by the release and does not include specifics regarding the employee's problems.

Helpful Suggestions When Referring an Employee to the EAP

Do not attempt to discuss an employee's personal problems. Be as supportive as you can, but maintain your position that performance on the job must improve. If an employee volunteers that a personal problem is at the root of his/her poor performance, refer him/her to the EAP, but do not accept this as an excuse for poor performance. Unacceptable performance must be corrected, and acceptable work standards maintained, in spite of personal problems.

Describe—do not evaluate. For example, say, "Pat, I see that you have taken sick leave six Mondays in the last two months. I am concerned about the impact this is having on your performance and on your colleagues." Do not say, "Pat, you must be drinking on weekends, since you're never here on Mondays."

Do not rely on your memory. Have your incident file—days absent, sick leave, mistakes, accidents, etc.—in front of you. It is likely that you will run into defensive, upset, and hostile reactions.

Do not let yourself be led from your main point: *work performance must improve.*

Stick to what you can document. If the employee thinks your points are based on hearsay or vague reports, he or she may not be convinced that your criticisms are fair. Specific behavioral observations and documented facts are your most convincing approach.

Do not try to diagnose an employee's problems. So-called "obvious" problems are sometimes the most difficult to diagnose accurately. Avoid "isms" and labels. Leave diagnosis to **trained professionals.**

Do not make idle threats. Explain clearly what will happen if work performance does not improve. You must be able to follow through on any action you use as a warning. Otherwise, the employee (and co-workers) will not take you seriously.

Be honest, be firm—and be respectful. Remember that a "straight-on" approach encourages respect on both sides. Do not ignore the situation! In most cases, it will only get worse, not better.

Follow-up: The Managerial Role After Referral

After you have met with the employee, we recommend that you contact the EAP to inform us about your referral. The information you provide us will help us best assess and address the employee's issues should he/she decide to use our services. It is important to continue the ODIR process. Continue to observe and document your employee's performance and provide him/her with feedback, whether the performance is improving or not. Feel free to call us to ask questions or provide us with information. If we cannot release information to you because of confidentiality, we will let you know.

Confidentiality

One of the biggest concerns of employees using a counseling service is confidentiality. Everyone who uses the EAP is protected by professional standards of confidentiality, as well as by federal and state law. It is important that you communicate to employees that no information regarding their problems will be transmitted without the express written permission of the employee. Exceptions to this occur when a counselor is concerned about the safety of the employee or others. This will be explained to the employee at the time of EAP intake. Clarify that no information regarding EAP use will enter the employee's records.

In Conclusion

We know that confronting an employee with poor work performance can be an uncomfortable task; and when that person is a friend or valued colleague, it is especially difficult. However, ignoring the situation does not help the employee. Family and friends often cover for or ignore a person's problem behavior. Because your role is monitoring job performance, you are in a key position to see an employee's behavioral patterns and changes. Your confrontation can be a strong motivation to the person to face his or her problems and understand the necessity of changing.

A RESPONSIBLE SUPERVISOR CAN BE THE BEST HELP A TROUBLED EMPLOYEE HAS

Remember, an employee may not always be able or willing to bring performance up to par. Success cannot be guaranteed, no matter how much goodwill and effort go into ensuring an employee's improvement. However, if you follow the steps in this guide, you will give your employee the best possible chance of succeeding.

Patterns of Job Performance Deterioration

The key words in relation to the job performance problems noted below are continuing and repeated.

1. **Absenteeism.** Patterns of absenteeism vary from person to person. The following are some general patterns. Generally, any excess or increases in absenteeism should be noted.

   - Unauthorized leave
   - Excessive sick leave
   - Monday absences, Friday absences, or Monday and Friday absences
   - Repeated absences
   - Excessive tardiness, especially on Monday mornings or in returning from lunch
   - Leaving work early
   - Peculiar and increasingly improbable excuses for absences
   - Higher absenteeism rate than other employees for colds, flu, gastritis, etc. (and consequently, more claims on company health insurance).
   - Frequent unscheduled short-term absences (with or without medical explanation)

2. **On-the-Job Absenteeism**
   - Continued absences from worksite
   - Frequent trips to water fountain or bathroom and/or long coffee breaks
   - Physical illness on job

3. **High Accident Rate (and consequently, more accident claims)**
   - Accidents on the job
   - Accidents off the job (but affecting job performance)

4. **Difficulty in Concentration**

5. **Confusion**
   - Difficulty in recalling instructions and details
   - Increasing difficulty in handling complex assignments
   - Difficulty in recalling own mistakes

6. **Sporadic Work Patterns**
   - Alternate periods of very high and very low productivity.

7. **Generally Lowered Job Efficiency**
   - Missing deadlines
   - Making mistakes due to inattention or poor judgment
   - Wasting material
   - Complaints from those served by the employee

8. **Employee Relations. On-the-Job friction in employee relationships, including supervisor-employee relationships, usually results in decreased job performance and efficiency**
   - Overreacting to real or imagined criticism
   - Wide swings in mood
   - Complaints from co-workers
   - Unreasonable resentments
   - Avoiding coworkers

9. **Changes in Personal Appearance/Hygiene**

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For inquiries or complaints about discrimination against MCPS staff *	For inquiries or complaints about discrimination against MCPS students *
Office of Employee Engagement and Labor Relations Department of Compliance and Investigations 850 Hungerford Drive, Room 55 Rockville, MD 20850 240-314-4899 OCOO-EmployeeEngagement@mcpsmd.org	**Office of School Administration** Office of School Administration Compliance Unit 850 Hungerford Drive, Room 162 Rockville, MD 20850 301-279-3444 OSSI-SchoolAdministration@mcpsmd.org

Inquiries, complaints, or requests for accommodations for students with disabilities also may be directed to the supervisor of the Office of Special Education, Resolution and Compliance Unit, at 301-517-5864. Inquiries regarding accommodations or modifications for staff may be directed to the Office of Employee Engagement and Labor Relations, Department of Compliance and Investigations, at 240-314-4899. In addition, discrimination complaints may be filed with other agencies, such as: the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Baltimore Field Office, City Crescent Bldg., 10 S. Howard Street, Third Floor, Baltimore, MD 21201, 1-800-669-4000, 1-800-669-6820 (TTY); or U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Lyndon Baines Johnson Dept. of Education Bldg., 400 Maryland Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20202-1100, 1-800-421-3481, 1-800-877-8339 (TDD), OCR@ed.gov, or www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/complaintintro.html.

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