

# HR

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# FrontLine Supervisor

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<http://www.dop.wa.gov/eap>

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■ **I am shocked at the number of murder-suicides in the news. Has the government, namely the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), said this is related to the economy? Besides knowing the warning signs, what can the workplace do to help reduce these incidents?**

Since 1995, NIOSH, has published information on preventing violence in the workplace. No official position documents a correlation between murder-suicide and the present economic climate. Many experts argue there is a correlation, but mass killings also happen in the best economic times. Hundreds of workplace homicides occur every year. When notes are left by perpetrators, common denominators include feelings of being ridiculed, belittled, persecuted, or simply frustrated by an inability to adapt. Research does show that in the midst of a downturn, *domestic violence* increases. NIOSH has many recommendations to help prevent violence at work. Most relate to environmental controls such as lighting, awareness, signage, etc. One specific recommendation is that employers provide training in conflict resolution and nonviolent responses to conflict. An excellent resource for exploring workplace violence is your EAP's *Guide to Workplace Violence Prevention and Response*, which includes a special section on domestic violence. This guide can be downloaded from the EAP website or received in booklet format.

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■ **I dislike correcting an employee's performance and dealing with matters of discipline. I know this is an expectation in a supervisor's job description. How do I learn to be less emotionally affected by this part of my job? Can the EAP help me?**

**Let's face it, confronting** performance problems and matters of discipline is not pleasant, and most supervisors don't like dealing with these issues. If you feel your performance is substandard because of your resistance or inability to manage disciplinary matters successfully, consulting with the EAP is a smart move. The EAP will provide tips and tactics to help make interviews related to job performance concerns go smoother. Learn and practice a basic "model" or structure to a successful performance interview. One approach is: 1) state the work standard, 2) describe unacceptable performance, 3) list the facts, 4) state acceptable behaviors and expectations, 5) listen to the employee, 6) answer the employee's pertinent questions, 7) be sure the employee knows and understands what's needed now, 8) wrap it up with an optimistic attitude. Caution: Keep meetings to the point. Don't drag out a meeting in an effort to make it end on a happy note. This can undermine an employee's awareness of the urgency to improve unacceptable performance.

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■ **I am not an “act-tough” supervisor. I tend to be on the soft side because I want people to be open with me. I am easy to talk to. I don’t mind being vulnerable and showing my feelings, but some employees act hostile toward me. What causes this reaction?**

**Unfortunately, some** personalities will take advantage of you when you make yourself vulnerable. Vulnerability may be seen as an opportunity to gain control and will result in you not being respected in the way you would hope. Instead, these employees may see you as weak. Typically, these individuals are projecting their own damaged self-esteem. Being weak in the past for them was seen as a failing that led to their personal hurt. When this vulnerability is seen in others, it is retaliated against because of what it represents - a weak person not worthy of the same level of respect they have seen others receive. This doesn’t mean you should change, but with awareness of how you interact with employees and how they respond, you can tailor your approach in one-on-one meetings so your goals are met in helping employees improve performance. Consulting an EA professional may provide you with valuable insight and tools needed to deal effectively with your hostile-acting employees.

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■ **My employee comes to work every day in a bad mood, seemingly with “a chip on his shoulder.” He’s ready to argue or say “hmm-hmm” a lot in a cynical way. How can the EAP counselor help an employee change a “bad attitude?”**

**The negative behaviors** you describe will create problems in the workplace.

An employee’s attitude, good or bad, is based upon past or present beliefs concerning self, others, or the workplace. The goal of employee assistance is to help the employee discover and deal with personal problems that create his “bad attitude.” But there may be no present set of circumstances that give rise to the attitude problem or the employee may not be ready to deal with certain issues. A “bad attitude” can begin with a deep-seated situation that becomes part of an individual’s personality. Such a personality can damage workplace productivity and morale plus affect turnover. Your supervisory role is to define and address unacceptable behaviors, insist on change, and reinforce improved behaviors. Doing this will be crucial to a successful outcome. An EA professional can help with this process by suggesting ways to address specific behaviors as well as how to refer your employee to the EAP and motivate him to change.

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■ **My employee has two teenagers in trouble with the law. They burglarized a home, and the media brought our agency’s name into the story. I feel like this negative publicity has caused our reputation to suffer. Can I make a supervisor referral for his parenting problems?**

**Your employee may** or may not be an effective parent, but parenting is not part of the job description. A supervisor referral to the EAP based on these issues would be improper. This does not mean the EAP can’t be helpful. The incident is public news and you can encourage your employee to contact the EAP to assist in dealing with personal stress, but don’t base your recommendation upon parenting. The EAP will know where to begin and in which direction to head if the employee accepts an appointment. Your employee is probably upset and embarrassed about the news coverage as well as the children’s behavior. Your employee may appreciate the supervisor’s concern and welcome an EAP referral for not only personal support but also resources to help your employee cope during this difficult time.

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