



Dear Chief

By Jeff “Chief” Urbaniak
COLUMNIST

DEAR CHIEF: I have an employee with some ongoing personal problems and they are negatively affecting his work performance. My boss has told me to document his substandard performance and to stay out of his personal life. I’m doing that but I feel he can be saved from being fired if he gets the right help. I don’t want to go against my boss’s guidance but I also don’t want to lose this employee. He actually is a great performer when he’s not having personal problems. What should I do?

BOSS WITH EMPATHY



DEAR BOSS WITH EMPATHY: This can often be an issue most bosses struggle with from time to time. There is no standard approach in dealing with employees’ personal problems. What it comes down to is your personal judgment and solid research on possible options.

After you’ve documented your employee’s substandard performance, keeping it fact-based and leaving the nature of his personal problems out of the record, check with your human resources department and see if they have employee referral programs for

Personal problems affecting work

situations like these. If they do, then you have the right to refer your employee to them, and your boss should not have a problem with you doing that. If they don’t, conduct research and see if there’s a reliable source in your local area that can help. But keep in mind, you are not obligated to do this--this is where your personal judgment is key.

When your boss tells you to stay out of your employees’ personal lives, he or she most likely means for you to not get entrenched in their personal situations, giving them your own advice. Unless you are trained or are an expert in personalized counseling, you could be wrong in your diagnosis and subsequent advice and then an employee could end up blaming you for any potential negative consequences they encounter afterwards. It’s best to refer them to an expert.

According to the U.S. Labor Department, 10 to 20 percent of employees have personal problems that reduce their productivity by up to 25 percent. It goes on to say, in such situations, you need to analyze the problem and meet with the worker, but it’s vital that you talk with that employee in the right way (a dignified manner). Why? You don’t want to offend or embarrass him or her, nor do you want to spark a complaint or a lawsuit. The

Business Management Daily says if you talk to the employee the wrong way, a lawsuit is possible because the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) covers employees with “perceived disabilities” as well as real ones. So if you say the wrong thing to an employee (“I can see you’ve got psychological problems”) and then fire him or her, that employee could file an ADA lawsuit, saying the organization perceived his or her mental disability and should have accommodated it.

All people deserve to be given options for help. Whether they choose to act on them or not is entirely their choice, not yours. You can’t save everyone from personal problems. Life happens. All you can do is help point them in the right direction if you have resources that tell you what the right direction is. Regardless what they choose, be encouraging and show that you care. Hopefully they take the appropriate action to improve their personal situation and become a constructive employee again.



For an opportunity to have your question, issue or concern addressed in the Dear Chief column, go to www.DearChiefAdvice.com and submit your comments or email them to Jeff@DearChiefAdvice.com.