Q: We referred a construction employee who stole paint to the EAP and decided not to fire him. He claimed it was for his house, but I'm doubtful. Can Continuum determine his true motive and inform us?

A: The Continuum EAP professional will likely uncover the actual reason behind your employee's theft of the paint if it differs from the explanation initially provided. However, even with a signed release of information, the EAP won't disclose this type of information, as a standard practice, recognizing the importance of confidentiality. They will only share what's necessary for you to manage the worker's performance. This does not preclude the employee from sharing the real reason with you directly, if they so choose, if it differs from the original story. EAP assessment interviewing is a skill and an art, and experienced EAP professionals use effective questions to identify underlying issues that contribute to the observable problem(s) experienced by the worker. Keep in mind, you decided to help your employee with whatever prompted him to steal the paint, so the real goal is to address any associated personal issues in order to reduce the risk of his repeating the behavior.

I get angry with workers who do not correct their own performance and seem passively resistant to change. I know I should remain calm, but I fear if I don't demonstrate anger and frustration, they won't take me seriously. What's the answer?

A: In all interactions with employees, demonstrate a calm, structured and empathetic approach. Ironically, you will be more successful regardless of the situation. Remind yourself to remain calm, knowing that you will think more clearly doing so. If you feel anger during a discussion with an employee, pause before you react. Three to four seconds will seem like an eternity, but you will collect your thoughts and respond more constructively. The challenge is to focus on the behavior and not the person. This guiding principle helps you disengage from any personality features that may trigger your agitated response.
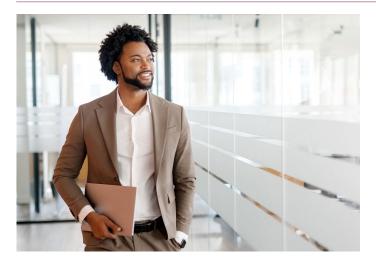
TIP: To help reduce employee defensiveness, frame feedback in terms of behaviors and actions rather than personal attributes. E.g. "Alex, I've noticed that the last three reports were submitted two days past the deadline. This delays our project timelines, and we then can't proceed with the next steps."

Q: I'm a new supervisor. What initial mistakes might I make, based on common errors of other new supervisors? I know to avoid micromanaging, being overly demanding and isolating myself, but can you highlight other potential pitfalls?

A: Aside from the missteps mentioned, new supervisors often make a few other common mistakes, including failing to provide employees with clear expectations, avoiding difficult conversations, trying to be everyone's friend, and not enforcing policies consistently among employees. Not giving clear instructions leads to incomplete work and disappointing results that frustrate both the employee and the manager. Avoiding difficult conversations associated with employee behaviors leads to unresolved problems that nearly always grow bigger.

Attempting to be everyone's friend often blurs the lines between professional and personal relationships, and this can undermine your authority and complicate decision-making. In short, not enforcing rules and policies equally leads to complaints of favoritism and confusion among workers.

I find dealing with inconsistent work and performance to be time-consuming and difficult. Often, employees seem surprised when I raise issues with them. What can supervisors do to speed up the process of correcting performance?

A: Employees often state that their supervisor hasn't made sufficiently known what is expected of them. Many don't have a job description, and years pass without annual reviews for some. So, employees are surprised when their performance is corrected. Ensure that you communicate with the worker about the job roles, responsibilities and standards. Check in and give feedback often at first, and regularly afterward. Examine with your employees each of their job functions and the standards set.

Using this process, you are almost guaranteed to have no surprised employees when performance is corrected. Let employees know what "outstanding" looks like, and likewise with gradations like "above average," "average," "satisfactory," and below. Use performance improvement plans to maximize clarity, when needed, and then rely on your HR or management advisor for guidance regarding how to implement them.

TIP: *Encourage a workplace culture where accountability is valued and expected.*