

A CULTURE OF COMPASSION: EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS IN THE WORKPLACE

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In time, all things change. Small seeds become giant oak trees, little babies become leaders of multitudes, small streams carve out mammoth canyons, and technology changes from the ability to create fire to a globalized computer network. Organizations are not beyond the reach of the hands of time, and as such have changed.

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are probably the most prominent sign of organizational change. There was a time when workers were a dime a dozen – if one would not or could not do a job – two more could be found to replace them. That is not the case today where many jobs require vast knowledge and training. Organizations have changed from viewing their employees as disposable to viewing them valuable commodities. Employees are no longer fired for simply missing a day of work – it is too costly to do so, so other ways of handling employee problems were developed. EAPs are one such result.

EAPs can be defined as a “systematic, organized and continuing provision of counseling, advice, and assistance” to an organization’s employees (Butler 1997). It is a program usually offered to the individual employee that uses behavioral science techniques to recognize and control both work and non-work related problems that may be affecting job performance. The hope is that with the assistance of the EAP, the individual will be enabled to return to a level of full functioning and contribution in both their work life and their personal life (Berringer 1994). They are an effective and growingly popular method of handling employee problems. In fact, a 1994 survey found that 83% of 1,035 major US corporations offered EPA provisions (Sunoo 1996).

The question is, however, why would organizations make such dramatic changes in their perception and treatment of employees that result in the costly development of EAPs? First and foremost, organizations are concerned with making money – this is after all, why they are in business to begin with! EAPs may cost money to run, but in the long run they save the company money and provide opportunities for strong financial growth. These cost considerations as well as political and humanistic reasons for creating EAPs (Butler 1997) motivate most companies. The decision to introduce and maintain EAPs often are a product of a long-term strategy and philosophy (Berridge 1994) of an

organization to increase profits and maintain valuable employees. Since organizations have invested much time and money into employees, it would make sense that they would create a method for the continuing growth of said employees. After all companies spend millions to upgrade their technology and tangible assets, it makes sense that they would do so for their human assets as well. To emphasize the personal, social, family, and professional development of employees (Tittlemore 1994) is on a sense to “upgrade” the employee and therefore raise their value to the organization.

More and more companies are beginning to realize that it is increasingly difficult to separate an employee’s personal life from their work. When employees are having a problem in either arena, it created a costly cycle. They take their work problems home, which creates stress and results in problems in their personal life, the employee then turns around and brings their personal problems to work which only serves to increase their work problems (Hockley 1992). An ongoing and problematic cycle ensues in which the employee is rendered ineffective in both their work and personal life. An EAP attempts to break this cycle and help the employee return to a normal level of functioning in both arenas. Organizations are beginning to view their workers as human assets – and humans are not like machines. A squirt of oil and anti-viral software is not going to do the trick in maintaining those assets. A culture of compassion has evolved in response to organization’s realization of employees as valuable assets and human beings.

Compassion Through Safety

In viewing employees as valuable human assets, it is important to take a look at the basic needs of people – one of which is safety. Organizations are beginning to put inordinate amounts of attention on the issue of workplace safety. Let’s face it, not much work will be done if the employees are afraid, injured, or dead. That is why great efforts are being put forth in identifying and neutralizing potentially dangerous situations.

Many companies are focusing their efforts on such potential dangers as drug and alcohol abuse and violence. In fact, the realization that workers who are abusing substances are dangerous to the workplace environment gave birth to the development of EAPs (Wojcik 1992). A recent survey pointed out just how dangerous substance abuse can be in the workplace. It was estimated that 40% of industrial fatalities and 47% of on the job accidents involved alcohol (Sell 1992) - imagine the numbers if we were to look at drugs as well. When we take into account that 68% of drug users are employees (Zetlin 1991), the danger potential is uncomfortably high. There are several methods for dealing with substance abuse within the organization, and most of them are linked to EAPs.

Companies have the option to utilize education and awareness programs, substance testing, and surveillance techniques – most of which can be separate to or used in conjunction with EAPs (Sell 1992).

Companies have an option as to the manner in which they handle employees who are abusing substances and endangering the workplace - they can simply ignore the problem, fire employees who abusing substances, or they can help them deal with their problem in a compassionate manner. The majority of companies today are choosing compassion

over the quick fix of just firing the employee. EAPs are playing a large role in helping employees to avoid and overcome their substance abuse. The focus is on prevention and treatment.

Education and awareness programs are effective prevention methods. It is estimated that companies who have drug and alcohol awareness programs have a 55% lower rate of substance abusers in the organization (Zetlin 1991). However, once a habit of substance abuse has begun treatment is most effective. In conjunction with awareness programs, many organizations have started to screen their employees for substance abuse as well as training managers to look for problem signs.

An important component of dealing with substance abuse in a compassionate manner is consistency. Many organizations have created policies to help maintain consistency and to inform the employees of the companies standards as well as how they are willing to assist an employee with a problem. The policy often includes a definition of abuse so there are no gray areas for the employee. On the job standards are outlined as well as repercussions for not meeting those standards. Lastly the assistance that is available to the employee is specifically and clearly noted (Coshan 1992). By laying out a policy and offering preventative measures as well as treatment, many organizations are creating a safe work environment in a compassionate and effective manner.

Traditionally violence was not associated in any way with the work environment. However, in a world of work place massacres, terrorist bombings, and domestic abuse – companies have been forced to open their eyes and openly discuss and deal with violence. Organizations are responding by creating clear and straightforward policies, protocols, and guidelines on violence (Solomon 1998). Many companies have also enlisted EAPs to help them handle the issue of violence in a compassionate manner. The results include sensitization sessions, post-incident interventions, alternative dispute resolution, and supervisory training (Haskins 1994).

In the past managers have ignored signs of domestic abuse because it was “none of their business” and have promoted or transferred violent or potentially violent subordinates because they did not know how or did not want to deal with the problem (Solomon 1998). Today managers go through training to learn how to identify abusive situations and violent employees as well as how to intervene so as to diffuse possibly dangerous situations. It makes intrinsic sense to worry about violent employees and their impact on the work environment, but many companies are going beyond that and focusing on violence that occurs outside of work – family violence.

Companies are becoming more aware of family violence and its ability to bruise workplace productivity and morale. In an effort to take care of their employees, companies are offering employees a way out of violent home lives. Once a manager recognizes the sign of abuse or the employee asks for help the EAP is able to provide that employee with both long-term solutions as well as short-term protection through emotional support, advocacy, education, problem solving skills, safety plans, protection services, and the general alleviation of fears. By taking care of the employee outside the

workplace, the compassionate company profits with the resulting fully functioning and highly loyal employee.

Compassion for the Individual

Employee loyalty has become an increasingly important component in a company's success. Work is no longer a separate function of an employee's personal life, people do not simply "go to work." The present social culture is one of familial distance and single individuals. The workplace is full of people who are single, divorced, widowed, or separated. Families are distant, living in other cities and often are out of touch but for special occasions. Cities are large and impersonal – where once you may know everyone within a three block radius of your house, now you are lucky if you know what your next door neighbor does for a living. Not to mention the fact that we are a society that often shuns communication with strangers. Employees are becoming more and more reliant on the workplace to meet and talk to other people. In fact, the workplace has become a type of extended family for many employees (Sunoo 1996). Many companies have gone from forbidding personal relationships while at work to being much more compassionate about the employee's need for socialization and even fostering relationships. Many companies provide opportunities for their employees to meet one another and spend time together by coordinating softball teams, games, dances, and by providing fitness centers and spas where employees can interact (Hockley 1992).

Organizations are taking the idea of the individual and incorporating it more and more into the workings of the organization. The EAP is constructive in helping to carry over the softer, more humanistic philosophy to the managers and their subordinates. Suddenly EAPs are becoming part of the vocabulary of hardheaded managers and directors in organizations of all forms. They are also seen as capable of playing a growing role in keeping organizations operating at a high level of efficiency and nourishing the organizational culture. They are realizing that they as an organization have a responsibility to respond to the stressors encountered by their employees because those stressors are potentially related to if not caused by work. Those stressors are so prevalent that it is estimated that 21% of people in the workplace suffer from serious stressors that in some way affects their work (Hockley 1992).

Corporate culture has integrated compassion into the environment by viewing EAPs as a valid method of coping with internal and external problems facing the employee and the organization (Berridge 1994). After all, there is no rationale for people injuring themselves emotionally or physically for the sake of their employer – it benefits neither the employee nor the employer (Hockley 1992). EAPs are helping organizations to look at mental health care issues across the worksite and not just in little chunks and then providing their employees with appropriate care (Coughlin 1992). Companies are no longer giving lip service to employee health. Organizations are paying more attention to employee health than ever before. Most have developed wellness programs, and with the advent of HIV many are reaching out to help their employees live with terrible health issues – both on the physical and psychological level (Peters 1994). They are using EAPs as a method of conveying their compassion for their employees and their willingness to take action

and spend money to help employees solve personal as well as professional problems (Palmieri 1989).

Compassion Through Management

One of the first steps to a healthier and more compassionate work environment is the training of managers. Managers are being taught to change their leadership style to a more hands on approach – they are moving from being taskmasters to being facilitators (Yadrick 1998). In the past managers avoided as much as possible dealing with “problem employees.” If the problem was substantial a manager might choose to terminate the employee rather than try to resolve the employees problems. In the rare occasions that assistance was given it was reminiscent of the Victorian times when charity, morality, and the managers superiority over the troubled and inferior employee were the prevalent themes (Berridge 1994).

Today compassion has been taken into account in the discipline of employees suffering from personal or professional problems. Rather than acting in haste to discipline a troubled employee, they are referred to EAPs for assistance. The referral of an employee to an EAP is a gentler manner for managers to confront problem employees and offer them assistance (Milne 1994). Should the employee choose to partake and help themselves return to normal levels of functioning any incidents which lead up to the referral are dismissed and the employee starts fresh, without the having to drag along their past personal problems (Pine 1994). To be sure that the employees are aware of what is expected of them and what assistance is available to them, companies are developing management policies and procedures. Clear measure of performance are developed and reviewed regularly with all employees. Progressive discipline policies and procedures are outlined and implemented as well as a concept of reasonable accommodations that all employees are made aware of (Coshan 1992).

Compassionate training of managers goes beyond dealing with trouble problems; it also focuses on identifying employees who may be having problems that are not directly effecting their work. Supervisors were thought to be the best candidates for the training of how to recognize at-risk employees because of their proximity to employees as well as their ability to evaluate an employees job performance (Anonymous 1991). The training of compassionate managers is often two parts. The first focusing on the manager’s responsibilities, which include but are not limited to reviewing the work environment, reward systems, and their levels of interpersonal trust with the employees (Reese 1989). It is important for a manager to be aware of all of these so that they will be able to have a firm ground to stand on with the employees. Employees and managers need to work in an open environment of caring and understanding and be comfortable with each other in order to make a referral to an EAP a non-confrontative event.

Managers are also trained in the process of referring employees to EAPs. The most prominent barriers to a referral of a troubled employee to an EAP are often the manager’s own compassion. They often don’t want to get involved because they feel that it is none of their business, or they are afraid of insulting or hurting the feelings of a troubled

employee. Managers are taught that part of being truly compassionate about their employees is pointing out when an employee may need help and advising them on how to go about getting that help (Grensing 1988). It is also important how a manager words a referral to an EAP. If the manager refers an employee for “counseling,” that may infer that the employee is somehow disabled and the manager may inadvertently enact the Americans with Disabilities Act (Yadrick 1998).

Compassion Through Information

Information has always been a source of power. For centuries leaders have used information not available to others to gain power, control, and money. The 20th century changed all of this with the advent of the telephone and the computer, information is now available to all those who are willing to look for it (Bickerton 1987). And so information has become an important issue in employee participation in EAPs. It has also known that management and union endorsement are also great factors in employee participation (Feldman 1991). Organizations have realized that they must make information available about the EAP and its services to all of their employees. On the flip side, they have to ensure that information on individual employees is confidential.

In a recent survey the level of confidence and therefore participation of employees in EAPs is directly related to their perception of the confidentiality, credibility, and organizational neutrality of the program (Milne 1994). It is important for the organization to provide the employees with information regarding the credibility, neutrality, and confidentiality of the program. It is important to note that all confidentiality has its limit, when there is a serious danger potential, and employees should be made aware of this by a written description of the limits of confidentiality (Ince 1992). It is equally important to inform the employee of the neutrality of the program. It is important that the employee feel comfortable discussing work related problems without the fear of it effecting their job stability (Coshan 1992). However, the employee needs to be informed of the limits of neutrality as well as confidentiality. To help in the employees confidence in the neutrality of an EAP many companies go to great lengths to document work performance carefully in order to keep the EAP process objective and minimize any defensiveness that the employee may be feeling (Fuller 1992). Repercussions of not keeping employees fully informed could land an employer in the legal hotseat as well as having limited employee participation in their EAP. Organizations need to provide the information so those who are participating do not suffer a loss of reputation or feel like victims of unfair employment discrimination (Head 1988). By providing the necessary information companies are increasing employee participation as well as protecting themselves.

The informed employee is so essential to the success of an EAP that companies are going to great lengths to ensure that their employees receive the necessary information. One of the most popular methods of distributing the information is through new employee orientation meetings, approximately 90% of companies who have EAP programs distribute information during these sessions (Anonymous 1995). Other distribution methods include employee handbooks, presentations by EAP counselors, company

newsletters, bulletin boards, presentations by managers, and payroll enclosures (Milne 1994). All of these methods have the same objective – to make the employee aware that the EAP is designed to help them and their families (Fuller 1992).

Compassion Creates Profit

The decision to become a compassionate organization goes beyond the intrinsic humanistic benefits; it is an extremely profitable business tactic. The link between employee support and employee productivity is shown to consistently have a strong corresponding cost benefit (Reddy 1994). This is something that the majority of fortune 500 companies have realized. Most of them have implemented EAPs largely in part because they recognize that by helping employees cope with stress they are able to reduce absenteeism, improve morale, and ultimately boost profits (Highley 1994).

McDonnell Douglas commissioned a cost benefit analysis of their EAP and they found that the overall savings for the EAP population was \$5.1 million and the return on investment was \$4:1 (Highley 1994). A cost benefit analysis of the US Dept of Health and Human services found a \$7.01 return per dollar invested (Highley 1994). General Motors reported a payoff of 2:1 for its EAP and found that accidents had declined by 50% (Highley 1994). Chicago Bell claims that poor performance ratings dropped from 28% to 12% due to their EAP. It can be estimated that overall EAPs average a 3:1 return on the dollar (Highly 1994).

The dollar profit results from simply taking care of valuable employees. By doing this companies can greatly increase employee productivity, morale, motivation, loyalty, and confidence. It can also result in a reduction of absenteeism, turnover, sickness, accidents, insurance claims, and workers Compensation Board claims. Amazingly enough it appears to also create a reduction in employee tardiness. (Tittlemore 1994). Employers also see a significant reduction in the costs associated with grievances and termination (Kirrane 1990). It would seem that using compassion to identify troubled employees and referring them to receive assistance for EAPs is the most cost-effective and humane way to enhance productivity and morale of an organization (Raber 1989) and therefore increase profitability.

A culture of compassion is a win-win situation for organizations and their employees. The employee is taken care of and able to handle whatever stresses they may be suffering under in a supportive environment. The company benefits by higher profits and higher employee morale and loyalty. “A situation of interdependence and reciprocity is created between employee and employer, which represents an integration of interests and commitment.” (Berridge 1994). When the organization and the employee are on the same level, the workplace is a pleasant and productive environment. Compassion is not just touchy-feely mumbo jumbo; it is an intelligent business tactic.

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