



LEVERAGING VALUE IN YOUR EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

TODAY'S HR PROFESSIONAL IS faced with more issues than were faced 10 years ago. With faster computers, cell phones and the Internet, employees now have the opportunity to be more productive than any other generation. They are also presented with more problem situations than any other generation of employees. Some of these problems include workplace and personal/familial concerns. Specifically, a recent article in HR Magazine showed that there is an increase in the number of young people treated for a mental illness (Schramm, 2007). These issues directly impact employees' overall motivation and performance. To manage in this new world, HR professionals need the expertise of people who

understand human behavior and its impact in the workplace. This is where your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can help. In this article, we will clarify the role of an EAP in this new world of work and share ways in which your organization can get the most value from its EAP.

The International Employee Assistance Professionals Association (IEAPA) defines an EAP as "a worksite based program designed to assist: (1) work organizations in addressing productivity issues and (2) "employee clients" in identifying and resolving personal concerns, including, but not limited to health, marital, family, financial, alcohol..." (IEAPA, 2007). The EA professional recognizes two clients:

(a) the company, and (b) the employee when addressing these issues. The EA professional is uniquely qualified to balance the concerns of these two clients because he/she considers employees in the context of the worksite. EAPs also consult with management on such issues as handling conflict, confronting a troubled employee or other workplace based concerns. Ultimately, the goal of the EAP is to address productivity issues while being sensitive to employees' personal issues.

In addition to productivity issues, EAPs help employees, supervisors/managers, and their family members with personal problems. EAPs specialize in providing assessment, short-term counseling, linkage and referrals for a variety





of personal, social and emotional issues. A recent paper from the National Business Group on Health emphasized this linkage by stating that EAPs should "...coordinate with other health services including health plans, disability management and health promotion." By coordinating among these benefits, the EAP provides value to the company through early intervention, consultation and prevention.

Further, as an HR professional, your relationship with an EAP should be a strategic alliance with a knowledgeable professional. The strength of this alliance determines how well you and your company

are supported when workplace concerns arise. It is not unusual for an EAP to be called to provide services during company downsizing or when a critical incident occurs at work; however, your EAP will serve you better when that alliance is tapped before the crisis occurs. In order to strengthen your alliance, consider the following: (a) How involved is your EAP in training your managers? (b) How involved is your EAP in assisting you with regulatory issues, such as Department of Transportation Substance Abuse rules? (c) How involved is your EAP in consulting with your supervisors on

issues with troubled employees? The more comfortable your supervisors/managers are with talking to the EAP about these types of issues, the more likely they will be to utilize the services during a major crisis.

Finally, as you develop the initial stages of the working relationship, it is important to understand the backgrounds of EA professionals. Employee assistance professionals are unique behavioral experts who specialize in assessment, short-term counseling, workplace consultation and training. The EAP profession has developed an internationally recognized standard for knowledge in the delivery of these EA services—the Certified Employee Assistance Professional or CEAP. The CEAP represents a minimum of 3 years of experience, advisement from a seasoned professional and passing a test based on a wide knowledge base that includes behavioral health issues, human resource policy and federal laws. This wide knowledge base allows the CEAP to understand both clinical and workplace perspectives. That perspective provides a "win-win" opportunity for the company and the employee when addressing productivity issues arising from personal problems.

An employee assistance program is an inexpensive, but powerful tool for helping companies with productivity issues. Through a strategic alliance with your EAP, you can leverage more value from the benefit package that you purchase for your employees. The value is in the way you use your EAP and how responsive your EAP is to the needs of your workplace. ■

References

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