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Why Don't Employees Use EAP Services?

If your organization has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), you may already know it has great value as a



coaching resource, as a career-rescue tool, and as a literal lifesaver for employees who are under severe personal and professional stress. I've used EAP counseling when I was in law enforcement and found it useful (for those things I saw in the field that I don't want to see again, least of all in my dreams). I tell the participants in my training classes that I've used EAP and I emphasize that it's okay to reach out for help. Yet some EAPs are under-used. Why? There are really five reasons why employees don't use EAP and I'll list them in the most-frequent order: they don't think it's confidential; they feel there is a stigma for reaching out for help (especially for some men, who see this as a weakness); they think they have to ask permission from their boss or HR; they hear about it being bad-mouthed at work; or they don't know it exists. Let's tackle each one. First, part of our mission, as supervisors, coaches, or HR professionals, is to educate employees about how EAP works, starting with the fact that it is absolutely confidential (unless the client wants to harm himself or herself or others,

then the therapist has a duty to warn or intervene). We need to continue to remind our employees that no reports come back to the organization and that there is no external record of their EAP use. Second, it makes sense to reassure employees that every one of us has similar on and off-the-job struggles. It's no sin for people to reach out for help when the "allostatic load" (as our psychologist friends like to call it) gets piled too high and deep. Tell your employees what subjects EAP covers, including: financial problems, marital issues, raising children or step-children, blended families, sick kids, cancer, stress-related illness, parents with Alzheimer's, grief from death or loss, at-work or line-of-duty deaths, gambling problems, money worries, substance abuse, eating disorders, job burnout, workplace conflicts, depression, or suicidal thoughts. Each of these concerns can be addressed urgently and competently by an EAP professional, who may have a list of resources where he or she can refer the employee as well. Third, just as the use of EAP is confidential, there is no need for employees to tell anyone, ask permission, go through HR channels, or do anything other than call the EAP phone number and make an appointment. Most EAP providers are flexible. They will work with some employees at their therapist offices; they will work with the employee over the phone; or they can even meet the employee at the worksite. (Counseling an employee on the job - typically during a lunch break and in a private room - may be necessary for the safety of all involved in a domestic violence situation where the employee cannot go to a therapy appointment.) Fourth, people in the organization who speak disparagingly of using EAP services, thereby allowing peer pressure to drive employees who may be on the fence from getting help. I've heard supervisors and employees, say unhelpful things like, "EAP is for crazy people" or "Why bother going? It's not confidential and HR always finds out anyway." I tell employees if they have used EAP and feel comfortable about telling a trusted colleague, then do so and help change the stigma. Managers and supervisors should keep their negative comments to

themselves, especially if they really don't understand how EAP works. Better to mention the availability of EAP, distribute the brochures at a staff meeting, and keep the editorializing out of it. Lastly, the issue of the employee not knowing about EAP services puzzles me the most. The program often gets a mention in new-employee orientation sessions, it's common to see posters and brochures in the breakrooms, and forward-thinking EAP providers will come to the organization and do lunchtime presentations to introduce themselves. My claim to fame (however modest) is that in 1994, I co-wrote one of the first business books on workplace violence. For the ***Ticking Bombs*** book, I interviewed workplace double-murderer, Robert Mack. He was a 25-year employee of General Dynamics in San Diego, and he killed the labor relations manager handling his termination case and shot and wounded his boss, who later died. During my prison interview with him, he told me he had suffered depression, psychotic breaks with reality, and cocaine addiction. I asked him why he didn't reach out for EAP help and he told me he hadn't known about it. EAP services were at General Dynamics 17 of his 25 years there. Sometimes we must lead the horses to the water.

Dear Dr. Steve

“What are we required to do for employees who are victims of domestic violence or stalking?”

With the passage of Senate Bill 400 on January 1, 2014, California became the seventh state in the US to mandate “reasonable



accommodation” from employers for employees who are victims of domestic violence. Here are some notes from the amendment: “SB 400 extends existing protections for victims of domestic violence or sexual assault to victims of stalking. Existing protections will

now be extended to dv, sexual assault, or stalking victims including: time off to appear at legal proceedings (all employers), and to seek medical/psychological treatment, including safety planning (employers with 25 or more employees). The act also makes it unlawful to discriminate or retaliate against an employee because of his/her status as a victim of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking. It further adds a new 'reasonable accommodation' requirement for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking. Reasonable accommodations under the statute may include implementation of safety measures." In other words, organizations can't summarily terminate an employee who comes to them or when they discover a domestic violence-related situation that affects the workplace. This was a convenient and unfair solution (which still exists in the majority of states), when employers would find an angry ex-husband or soon-to-be ex-boyfriend in their office lobby, threatening his former loved one and anyone else in sight. Firing the employee left her or him with two issues: no job and still the same potentially dangerous ex. Organizations that want to be good shepherds for their people will address these volatile, emotional, distracting, and dangerous situations by using empathy, patience, good advice, partnerships with security professionals and law enforcement, help from city or county prosecutors and/or company attorneys (who can provide advice with civil stay-away orders), EAP, or domestic violence victims' advocacy groups. In other words, it's an "us" issue, as in what do we do about helping this employee, who wants to keep her or his job but is afraid of losing it and being injured or killed. In a perfect world, all remaining states would create laws that offer more protection from termination for employee-victims of domestic violence. Until then, we should work together internally and externally, to address the issue with a safety plan for the employee and a security plan for the organization.

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