MODULE 5: THE ROLE AND VALUE OF EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS (EAPS)

Personal Problems Come to Work. Most employees, at some time in their careers, will struggle with a problem that will distract them at work. Distraction can come in many forms, but some of the more difficult forms of distraction for employers to manage are the ones involving an employee's personal life.

- Joe's wife is threatening to leave if he doesn't spend less time at work and more time at home.
- A teacher called Steve to say the school wants to move his child into a "special" class.
- Kim and her husband really want to help pay for their son's college but can't see how to make it work.
- Regina knows her mom should stop driving but has no clue how to break the news.
- Michelle just can't shake the "blues" she's been feeling for the past several months.
- Rodney is terrified his doctor will decide to pull him off his pain meds.

Not only do these issues impact the health and well-being of an employee and his or her family, they put a strain on co-workers and the workplace as a whole. And that strain has a direct link to the operational and financial stability of the company

According to SHRM, the Society for Human Resource Management, turnover costs are about one-third of the workers' annual earnings – 67% of the losses are associated with soft costs like reduced productivity, interview time and lost knowledge, and 33% attributable to *hard costs* like recruiting, background checks, drug screens and utilizing temp workers.

In terms of absenteeism, the U.S. Department of labor reports that workers who are in recovery from a substance use disorder average nearly 10% fewer days of unscheduled leave per year than other workers. And the turnover rate for employees in recovery is 12% lower than the overall average. And there are also savings in terms of healthcare costs -- including hospital and emergency room use, ambulatory and primary medical care.

The ways employers respond to the impact caused by an employee's personal problems on the job are countless. Some are embarrassed or hesitant to confront the workplace behavior in fear it will make things worse. Some are willing to tackle the problem head-on while others are intolerant and want to throw the employee (and the problem) off the job. Still others completely ignore the problem in hopes it will disappear. Whatever the response, expecting employees to leave their personal problems at the threshold of the workplace door is both antiquated and unrealistic. Personal problems come to work and negatively impact the workplace.

But how does a company respond? As tempting as it might be to get rid of the person instead of the problem, doing so costs roughly 25 – 200% of annual compensation to replace that employee -- not including the loss of institutional knowledge, service continuity, and co-worker productivity and morale that can accompany employee turnover. But how do employers balance the hassles and risks associated with trying to help employees? They need to deal with the workplace impacts -- help the employee "get it together" trying to salvage the investment they've made in them -- all the while respecting the employee's privacy.

The key to addressing personal problems that come to work is to have a plan in place to both increase the likelihood that the employee will get the problem resolved quickly, and decrease the impact that it has on the job. At the heart of this plan is having a knowledgeable, professional resource available that simultaneously targets both of these objectives: helping the troubled employee and assisting the employer to minimize the impact the situation could have on the workplace.

For employees, there is a range of helping resources available including community resources subsidized by tax dollars, health and welfare benefits offered by unions, and preferred providers on a health insurance panel. While these resources may be suitable for

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the *employee*, they are not typically "constructed" to assist the employer. The most suitable resource, created specifically to serve both the employee *and* the workplace, is an Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

What is an EAP? Employee Assistance Programs do exactly what their name implies. They are employer-sponsored programs that offer resources and assistance for a wide range of personal issues that could impact employees' work. While EAPs were initially created with an alcohol and other drug focus, they have now expanded to address various health, wellness, work and general life concerns (often referred to as "broad brush approach" or "work/life balance") all of which can impact job performance and productivity.

EAPs are typically separate from a company's health insurance benefits. While an EAP can help employees who are struggling with medical conditions, they aren't necessarily equipped to diagnosis and treat those health conditions. EAPs are instead designed to assess emotional, mental and behavioral barriers that are preventing employees from focusing on their work, and connect them to resources to help remove those barriers.

- Joe and his wife were assessed as needing some marital counseling.
- Steve needed a sounding board to think of questions and concerns for his son's teacher.
- Kim and her husband got information about tuition assistance and the names of three local financial advisors.
- It was recommended to Regina that she join her church's support group for those dealing with aging parents, and was mailed a book of senior services in her community.
- Michelle was given information about seasonal depression and got an appointment with a counselor for a formal mental health assessment.
- Rodney talked with a trained counselor on the phone who helped him examine his relationship with his pain medications.

Services offered by EAPs. As with many things, there is no one-size-fits-all approach with EAPs. They are designed to meet the organization's and employees' needs. However, there are some critical services that most EAPs offer:

- 24-hour crisis line staffed by professional counselors
- Confidential assessments to identify the root of the employee's problem
- Brief, solution-focused counseling to resolve problems that do not warrant more critical intervention
- When critical care is needed, referrals to resources and professionals who can best address the particular issue
- Emergency intervention and critical incident stress management
- Substance abuse experts capable of providing assessment and treatment referrals for individuals struggling with substance use disorders

While many of the services provided by EAPs are targeted at the employee, EAPs also serve the *employer* with such things as supervisor training on topics including how to identify employees who may need help, the referral process, etc.; consultation about addressing behavior-related issues of the individual or group of employees; case management and return to duty recommendations for mandatory referrals; utilization reports and satisfaction evaluations; health benefits review and assistance instituting wellness programs.

The investment. Contracts with an EAP provider are typically structured on a per capita fee basis and services typically extend to dependents, spouses and domestic partners, regardless of whether or not the family member actually lives with the covered employee.

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The return. Because the focus of EAP programs is *work performance*, EAP contracts can produce positive returns in direct cost savings – like reduced medical, disability and workers compensation claims, and even more savings in the indirect costs associated with poor work performance.

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