



Taking a Stand

One EAP's Journey to Anti-Racism, Cultural Relevance & Bridge Building

| By Nancy Board, MSW

In November 2018, I joined the Washington State EAP as its Clinical Services Manager, with responsibilities for developing and managing the quality of our contracted EAP provider network. The network was comprised of licensed mental health professionals, most of whom worked in private practice. Early on I recognized the lack of racial diversity of this network and considered that our network demographics likely did not fully represent the demographics of our workforce, as just 12% of our contracted providers identified as non-white.

I wanted our services to be inclusive, representative and accessible to everyone and looked to target at least 25% representation with Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) / multi-cultural, multi-faceted providers within a year.

I believed this goal was achievable since I had successfully built an EAP provider network in the Asia Pacific (APAC) region encompassing 18 countries. I also vowed to learn more about our current providers as individuals, review their practice specialties and build a strong working relationship with them.

Accessibility

"I'd like to see a counselor that looks like me but I bet that's not possible."

No doubt many employee assistance professionals have heard a comment like this on more than one occasion. In other words, employees and managers question whether it is possible to meet with an EAP counselor they could relate to or met their preferences. Developing a more inclusive network for Washington State meant ensuring representation across a wide spectrum including:

- Age;
- Race;
- Class;
- Gender;
- Sexual orientation;

- Veteran status;
- Disabilities; and
- Others.

I believe all EAPs can and should be accessible to everyone, especially underrepresented populations, and that all counselors actively increase their competency in DEI, cultural humility, and commit to being anti-racist. It is up to each of us to understand the impacts of systemic racism and actively work to dismantle it. Building a more inclusive network is one small but important way that access to more under-represented employees is met.

Psychological Safety

As the pandemic stress and pain of racial injustice were reaching tipping points by June 2020, we were growing increasingly more concerned about the mental health of our workforce, particularly those most severely impacted. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) December 2020 Household Pulse Survey, 42% of U.S. (and Washington State) adults were experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety, and rates were even higher for those who are Black (48%), mixed race (48.9%), Latinx/Hispanic (46.3%), or 18-29 years of age (56.2%).

Employees of color have faced increased racially related aggression by co-workers and customers and reporting increased anxiety, depression, trauma, and exhaustion. We felt we needed to do more to better support employees so that they can show up for work and feel safe.

Accountability

As EAP organizations, I suggest we hold our leaders and teams accountable with diverse representation and a commitment to equity. Our customers and clients deserve services that are representative of them. Equity, Diversity, and Accessibility should be common

concepts to any network building initiative.

With so many resources available today, there is no excuse for keeping the status quo. It's incumbent upon all of us to commit to cultural humility, deepen our knowledge, and increase our awareness of equity and inclusion, and ensure that our clients will always have access to someone "who is like me."

Engaging with Business Resource Groups (BRGs)

Business Resource Groups or BRGs (Also known as Affinity Groups, Employee Resource Groups or Special Interest Groups) are voluntary, employee-led groups that foster a diverse, inclusive workplace aligned with organizational mission, values, goals, business practices, and objectives. Many organizations support them and membership is typically comprised of an organization's employee base. If you are an outside EA provider supporting an organization, learn more about the various BRGs within the organization you serve. The case study below is an example of EAP's experience with a BRG.

Case Study

Blacks United In Leadership and Diversity (BUILD)

The tragic deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and a local Tacoma, WA man, David McAtee, were deeply and personally impacting state employees. While COVID-19 continued to disproportionately impact communities of color, the pain and stress was palpable. In May 2020 the EAP was asked by BUILD leadership to engage Black counselors to facilitate listening sessions for its members during their monthly meeting via zoom. Leaders felt that having a "courageous space" to be honest and share pain was vitally needed.

Ten breakout "listening" sessions were held in June with BUILD members and guests, each facilitated by an EAP counselor. Due to the helpful feedback that EAP received, additional listening sessions were requested and held in July, August and September, in the same format, with Black counselors facilitating.

The Governor of WA State, Jay Inslee, called attention to EAP several times throughout 2020, recognizing the mental and emotional toll that systemic racism, racial violence, injustice and the toll of the pandemic was taking on so many employees and their families.

As the keynote speaker for the June 2020 BUILD

meeting, Governor Inslee responded to questions and calls for change. He too, publically recognized the importance of EAP as a valuable resource.

Partnering with BUILD in this way allowed the EAP to reach hundreds of individuals that might not have accessed services before. The partnership between EAP and BUILD was further strengthened and BUILD leaders routinely speak about EAP and recommend it as a valued and trusted resource.

Additional BRGs

For those EA professionals with access to BRGs in your organizations, I encourage you to become active in them, develop relationships among the members and learn more about the needs of these interest groups. Four of WA State's BRGs – Washington Immigrant Network (WIN), Rainbow Alliance and Inclusion Network (RAIN), Interagency Committee for State Employed Women (ICSEW) and Blacks United in Leadership and Diversity (BUILD) – all have active EAP representation among its membership. We show up, listen, learn and are committed



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to taking sustained action. Ask your BRG leaders for ideas on where to find resources that you might not be aware of.

What can you do as an EA professional to demonstrate more support for BIPOCs' lived experience?

Educate Yourself. Learn about the experiences and stress faced by so many BIPOC people. Coping with Race-Related Stress touches on emotional responses and the impact of the “imposter phenomenon.” There are ways to combat the negative effects of race-related stress and produce positive outcomes. Learn more and commit to being anti-racist. Commit to Racial Equity. Take the 21-day challenge or the 26-day racial equity journey as a way to begin. (Editor’s note: Online challenges can be found at <https://www.debbyirving.com/21daychallenges/> and <https://www.womanwithinthathome.org/26-days> respectively.)

Listen and Acknowledge. Listen to the experience of BIPOC people. Consider the grief and trauma of other people go through. Recognize the

pain and the truth of their experiences. Witness and acknowledge the harm that is being done to individuals and communities. If you are white, do NOT focus on your own feelings of guilt or being overwhelmed—keep the focus on those most impacted. If you need to, debrief your own experience with trusted colleagues at the EAP.

Take a Stand. Publicly acknowledge the challenging reality many people are facing. Whether you are supporting a parent home schooling, working remotely, or otherwise consumed by the emotional toll of the pandemic, consider those facing racial violence, and then **demonstrate empathy and** communicate your support. Commit to standing alongside those impacted. Listen more, and meet people where they are. Fund organizations that are dismantling systems of oppression. There are many of them.

Show Up. For EA professionals with access to BRGs in their organizations, reach out, develop relationships, and learn more about the needs of various populations you serve. It’s worth repeating that WIN, RAIN, ICESW, and BUILD all have active EAP representation in its general membership. Show up to listen, learn, and commit to taking sustained action.

How to Develop a More Inclusive Network

Start with Data. Determine the existing demographic makeup of your network. What demographics are missing or underrepresented? Who is missing? What specialty areas and marginalized groups are missing/underrepresented?

Conduct Research. Search for counselors that work with diverse and underrepresented populations. Look beyond the obvious and search out those with valuable lived experiences as well. Be curious and ask questions. Are you measuring the impact that racism and the pandemic is having on people? Are you asking questions about these areas?

Develop Relationships. Get to know your providers, what they specialize in and are passionate about. What communities or special groups do they know the most about? The least about? What is their experience with working with diverse populations? Are they an ally or advocate for *all* clients?



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Be Inclusive. Demonstrate inclusivity yourself. Be open, be curious, and share information. Solicit input, opinions and feedback from your providers. Be available and approachable, make time for one-on-one conversations with providers and offer to hold feedback sessions. Provide consultation and coaching on challenging cases. Model vulnerability, transparency, openness, trustworthiness, and compassion.

Summary

As a result of our efforts, the WA State EAP moved from a 12% non-white provider network in 2018 to 32% in 2020 with an intentional, purposeful, more inclusive approach. Additionally, many providers work across the gender spectrum and are allies to or identify as LBGTQIA. Having greater diversity across our network allows us to better serve our customers and clients, especially BIPOC during times

of great civil unrest, racially motivated violence and deepening trauma.

Pivoting quickly in March 2020, our goal was to support more people during the pandemic and racial reckoning. The WA State EAP substantially increased participation in the past year. Technology allowed us to reach many more individuals via tele-health, zoom meetings, customized webinars and sharing of online resources.

From January through December, we delivered **145 customized** presentations to **over 12,800 attendees in real time**, and **over 7,500** more watched on-demand. In total, we've reached over **20,300** individuals through webinar presentations alone. ❖

Nancy Board, MSW is a 30-year veteran of EAP, both in the U.S. and globally. She is currently the Clinical Services Manager for the WA State EAP and Co-Founder & COO for the non-profit, Global Women 4 Wellbeing (GW4W). You can reach her at nancy.board@des.wa.gov.

earoundup

Becoming More Anti-Racist in EA Field

Workplaces are addressing and beginning in many cases to dismantle long-standing systems and structures that uphold racism. These changes are happening quickly and around the globe. Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) have an opportunity to support and guide workplaces leaders as they seek out guidance and new solutions.

An article by Jodi Jacobson Frey describes 10 steps EAPs can take to start or continue on their journey to be more anti-racist within their own workplaces and with the workplaces they support. Read more at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15555240.2020.1785887>

EAPs are More Vital than Ever

EAPs are more vital than ever because employees and their families need mental health and work-life

assistance. They have proven their value in study upon study.

The 2020 Annual Report on the Workplace Outcome Suite (WOS) measured the effectiveness of EAP counseling and uncovered significant improvements in all five WOS measures of work presenteeism, work engagement, workplace distress, work absenteeism and overall life satisfaction.

The study found that return on investment (ROI) for employers in the US ranged from 3:1 for small size employers, 5:1 for medium size employer and to 9:1 for large size employers. The results found cost savings ranging from about \$2,000, to \$2,500 to \$3,500 per employee using the EAP.

But EAPs can't get the word out on their own, according to *Employee Benefit News*. They need a strong partnership with their client organizations to promote this much-needed program.

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