

The Journal of
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EAP in Vietnam *All About Geysers and Banana Trees*

“Employees do *not* take advantage of counseling services, but they *will* attend trainings – and even then, only if they do not conflict with the amount of work they are expected to complete.”

|By Bente Sternberg, MSW

In many countries, there are a number of cultural and other barriers that need to be addressed if the potential of EAPs is to be fully realized – and Vietnam is no different.

Traditionally, psychotherapy, or counseling, in Vietnam has been looked upon as something for a “crazy” person; someone who is unbalanced and cannot take care of him/herself. Counseling for employees in the workplace is unthinkable. It would be shameful to seek help; a loss of face. Vietnam’s urban growth has been phenomenal. The Vietnamese people are becoming more and more influenced by Western technology, ideas, and culture, including television, the Internet, and social media. Urban Vietnamese, particularly those in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, and Da Nang, are online, mobile, and highly connected to the modern world. In addition, the more sought-after jobs are those with global organizations or sophisticated Vietnamese entrepreneurial companies.

Limited Support for EAP

There is only limited support for the belief that EAP, in taking care of the employee, will benefit the company financially. Reduced medical costs,

lower absenteeism, and higher employee productivity are *not* attributed to EAP intervention – rather, the Vietnamese see workforce improvements as more a matter of better pay, competition, and style of management.

EAP is viewed as a Western curiosity that Vietnamese employees find interesting, and a service that brings status since it indicates that the company is “modern.”

Employees do *not* take advantage of counseling services, but they *will* attend trainings – and even then, only if they do not conflict with the amount of work they are expected to complete. Self-care is *not* considered the responsibility of the employer. Rather, it is thought of as something private; something that is dealt with by the family and certainly outside of work.

To take “work” time for training, such as for managing stress or balancing work and life responsibilities, is considered imprudent if work is pending. Previously, company time for training was only allocated to topics that would benefit management, such as leadership or management training – or something that would benefit the entire workforce, such as customer service. Even then, these types of trainings were considered a luxury.

Vietnamese Culture

It is important to keep in mind that in a highly contextual culture such as Vietnam, demonstrating and receiving respect from one’s peers, supervisors, and friends is critical to being viewed as a member of good standing in the community. An EAP *must* add credibility in order for the employee to increase his/her value to the community.

However, with the amount of changes occurring in the Vietnamese workplace, there are some stressful emerging concerns that are impacting the well-being and performance of employees. In the past, loyalty to one’s company was valued, but this has been replaced by market changes in which short-term employment and job-hopping are seen as the norm in order to secure better pay and greater benefits.

I was recently training a group of Vietnamese middle managers, and the recurring theme I heard was they all felt they were at the very edge of their skills and abilities – and if the work they did wasn’t perfect – they would be “exposed.”

Geysers

This workplace stress can be compared to a geyser. Let me

illustrate. Geysers randomly shoot expulsions into the sky that are predicted only by the accumulated pressure that sends the boiling, sulfur-filled water rising upward. Such “geysers” impact Vietnamese employees, who suddenly find themselves raising their voices, exploding, and saying things they regret. Individuals standing near the “geysers” also feel their effects. This not only acknowledges uncertainty in the workplace, but it also finds *these workers* unpredictably “exploding” the work pressure building inside them.

To use another metaphor, the “ground” (e.g. the work environment) near a geyser would feel like it was moving, but there was no stability of how or where to take the next steps.

Such pressures are not surprising, given the uncertain work environments and the volume of changes that Vietnamese employees are expected to learn. These changes, piled onto regular duties, and with a lack of clarity in communication and direction, have been overwhelming.

In addition, work changes are also accompanied by time demands that create new pressures within families. Less time with children, parents, and in-laws produces still further challenges and anxiety – especially since family is the mainstay of Vietnamese society. *Pressure from work being brought into the family was unheard of just a few years ago.*

Banana Trees

Many banana trees are planted around rice paddies in Vietnam. Vietnamese love this tree because they can eat the fruit, the tree secures the land that contains the water in the rice paddy, and its leaves can be woven into many items. The banana tree can grow anywhere and it doesn’t require much care. It is strong, it provides shelter, and the trunk can be dug into a canoe and taken with you out onto the water. *In many ways the resilience of the Vietnamese people is like a banana tree.*

Summary

Any introduction of EAP in Vietnam needs substantial teaching and education – as well as the counseling and coaching skills required for the modern world that Vietnam is becoming. Employees need coaching to gain the knowledge, practice, and experience to be resilient under these new working conditions. *Respect for resilience needs to be the cornerstone for any EAP approach.*

Counseling and coaching need to be presented as a process that increases the value of the employee to his/her community, helps them find inner strength, and adds “melody to the harmony of the community.” ❖

Bente Sternberg and her husband, Carl Sternberg, PhD, are Americans who have lived and worked in Vietnam for nearly 10 years.

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