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Providing Training for EAP Affiliates

Continuous training of network affiliates is critical to ensuring that both clients and providers develop manageable expectations about service delivery.

by Paula Gomez Hertz

EAS (Employee Assistance Services) is a company that provides employee assistance programs to different businesses in Chile. The programs cover around 12,900 workers, which entails 45,200 eligible persons when considering family groups.

EAS provides its services to companies located throughout Chile, so it needs to satisfy demand within a territory of more than 750,000 square kilometers (approximately 290,000 square miles, which is slightly smaller than twice the size of Montana). This involves coordinating networks to provide services that cover each and every city in the country.

EAS delivers its services through a network of 72 professionals throughout the country. To become part of the network, EAS psychologists must meet criteria that ensure quality and warmth. All psychologists must have clinical experience and be trained under specific clinical models, from which they must have gained experience handling and solving conflicts. Approximately 90 percent of these psychologists have obtained post-graduate degrees in brief psychotherapy, which allows them to conduct focused interventions within a limited period of time.

A key challenge regarding our affiliates is to maintain their sense of belonging to, and believing in, EAS. Consequently, we need to provide a program of continuous training that ensures a uniform level of quality in our processes.

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MANAGING CLIENTS' EXPECTATIONS

The need for affiliate training is all the more important because utilization of our services varies from an annual rate of 9.3 percent to as high as 32 percent, depending on the employer. Although these rates surpass the rates of many other EAPs in the world, follow-up surveys show high levels of satisfaction—about 98 percent of our clients say they are satisfied or very satisfied with the services we provide.

The common factor that affects satisfaction is connected with clients' expectations of support, as they report they need more concrete actions beyond the brief assistance provided by the EAP. It is very difficult to receive long-term treatments in Chile, mostly because they are very expensive. The high cost of such care means the EAP, with its free and confidential services, is in great demand, which poses challenges with respect to assuring a high-quality service regardless of the type of consultation or the client's location.

Based on information collected from our clients, it was decided that training and continuous education in clinical abilities and specific topics should be added to the criteria to enter the EAS professional network. The purpose of such training would be as follows:

- Strategically control and manage customers' expectations about the EAP. It has been observed that in many cases, clients put their hopes of solving severe and/or chronic problems in the hands of the EAP. These expectations, if not properly handled by network affiliates, may significantly affect the level of program satisfaction.

- Unify affiliates' criteria, guidelines, and objectives. This will require constant supervision to promote a sense of belonging and of teamwork throughout the network. At the same time, we should foster a coherent and shared approach to the assistance given.

Thus, having highly qualified EAP affiliates in Chile requires not only clinical experience and post-graduate studies, but also the ability to deal with clients' excessive expectations stemming from the limitations of our country's community mental health services. In light of these demands, training efforts must allow affiliates to do the following:

Many therapists have a high motivation to provide service, which can sometimes take them to areas that are outside the boundaries of the program.

Increase the effectiveness of consultations. Consultations are not intended to solve the whole problem presented by the clients, but it is necessary that they provide clients with effective tools to help them solve the problem. They should also offer and facilitate new actions that the clients have not tried before. To achieve this, the EA professional should be highly effective in both identifying new options that reflect clients' resources and limitations and in delivering these options efficiently in a limited period of time.

Increase clients' satisfaction.

Although clients' satisfaction is based on their problem resolution, their satisfaction is also connected with their perception of how well the EA professional received and assisted them. This requires affiliates to possess certain clinical abilities that enable them reach out to their clients with empathy and warmth and convey an understanding of the particular problems they present.

The training of a professional network should follow goals that, in addition to favoring the procedures of an organization, also mesh with affiliates' clinical work.

Manage clients' expectations.

Customer satisfaction entails connecting clients' expectations when they enter the program with what they are provided. Expectations can be reduced by assessing them at the beginning of the process, so as to identify and track those clients who expect to receive something that goes beyond the menu of EAP services. Once expectations are identified and assessed, it is imperative to work on them and limit them to what the EAP can provide, which is not an easy task. Affiliate providers need to be specifically trained to do this.

MANAGING THERAPISTS' EXPECTATIONS

Clients' expectations are not the only ones that need to be assessed. EAS' trainings differentiate levels of counseling from long-term psychotherapy to help assess, limit, and work on affiliates' expectations about the services they will provide. This is extremely important, as many therapists have a high motivation to provide service, which can sometimes take them to areas that are outside the boundaries of the program. In this sense, affiliate training begins when they observe the possibilities of assistance within an EAP context and understand psychological help not just as a means of complete problem resolution, but also as

the beginning of a process of change.

Models of effectiveness in psychotherapy propose identifying the variables that favor change, showing client and therapist in an interaction where the variables of the patient, the therapist, and the relationship between them intervene. The different training stages revolve around these three axes, so that therapists always work on variables that affect quality of service and customer satisfaction.

The training of network providers is performed mainly within two contexts:

- Through continuous supervision by e-mail or phone, according to the case. Affiliates have the opportunity and, in high-risk cases, the obligation to supervise all of their cases in conjunction with the EAS clinical manager. When necessary, it is the clinical manager who defines that a case must be supervised.
- At an annual workshop. Once a year, EAS' affiliates assemble for a meeting to address, in lectures and workshops, topics that have arisen during the year and are considered important enough to probe in more detail and depth. For example, in 2008, the workshop focused on expectations. Affiliate providers could explore the need to take expectations into account and develop, through training, the ability to ascertain and work on them with their clients.

Through our training of affiliates, we have found that assistance expectations, trust in oneself, and supervision can affect their effectiveness. In light of this, the training includes feedback to the affiliate providers about the quality of their processes. This feedback allows them to improve and constantly develop their abilities and to work on those aspects that need further development. It also permits the affiliate professionals to discuss different concerns and problems they may be having with their clients.

RECEIVING CONTINUOUS FEEDBACK

Research on the effectiveness of psychotherapy has pointed out that it is important for therapists to consider, when they intervene, the beliefs clients have about their problems as well as

about the resources at their disposal to deal with them. These considerations can make a difference in customer satisfaction with respect to the assistance offered.

The research findings have also shown the importance of including, in professional training for EAS services, information about the following:

- Focusing on the work objective;
- Managing clients' expectations, especially with respect to limiting them to an EAP context;
- Establishing small goals that allow patients to see progress as they solve their problem(s);
- Reframing clients' arguments so they develop a different perspective about their problem that can help them find new actions;
- Distinguishing, showing, and reinforcing clients' resources to empower them as effective agents of change; and
- Empowering clients to increase their self-efficacy and ability to continue their process of change beyond the EAP sessions.

Among the relationship variables that affect effectiveness are the therapeutic alliance (considering factors such as trust, warmth, and autonomy) and affiliates' experience. In the case of alliance, EAS therapists receive continuous feedback regarding their clients' perceptions of how they feel with their particular psychologist, with special attention given to warmth and listening skills. Similarly, in the annual workshop, although many topics and maneuvers are dealt with in depth, the aim is to train affiliates to apply them in a way that promotes a positive therapeutic relationship.

The training of a professional network should follow goals that, in addition to favoring the procedures of an organization, also mesh with affiliates' clinical work. With this training, therapists who see EAP services as an alternative for continuous development and learning will be committed to a sense of belonging to a professional team that seeks to support and help organizations and workers that require their assistance. ■