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Interview with Carl Tisone: EARF President Discusses History Project, Other Issues

The Journal of Employee Assistance recently had the opportunity to interview Employee Assistance Research Foundation (EARF) founder and President Carl Tisone, a longtime member of EAPA and early pioneer of US-based and international EA service delivery, about a new major research effort, the EAP History Project. Carl also discussed other issues pertaining to EARF and affecting EAPA and the EA field.

JEA: Carl, you have been a part of and lived through much of the most formative days of employee assistance development. Could you briefly explain how the EAP History Project came into being?

CT: From the very inception of the foundation, it has been our goal to raise the bar of professionalism for the EAP field by stimulating rigorous academically-based research and disseminating a wide variety of profession-enhancing information.

After the initial milestone projects, some of which are still being published and distributed, the Foundation Research Committee identified a serious shortcoming in our field, the lack of an independent, archival history about the development of employee assistance programs. This shortcoming is true both in the Americas and globally. Numerous “think tank” sessions led to the conclusion that our resources would be best utilized by sponsoring a complete chronological review of EAP development. Not only will this shed light on the many key individuals, organizations, and events that shaped the EAP field, but more importantly, it will also provide an essential guide for further evolution.

JEA: Employee assistance roots can be traced back to early alcoholism recovery, labor, and various social movements from the mid-1900s. What effect do you think the project will have on the employee assistance profession with such a concentrated look back?

CT: As long as I can remember, EAP work has been one of the most rewarding occupations one could choose. That said, the old guard is inevitably moving on, and our future rests in the hands of a young, vibrant cadre of Generation X-ers, Millennials, and others who will enable our profession to meet the challenges of the remaining decades of the 21st century.

Our historical retrospective is not about a nostalgic romp through “the good old days” (if ever there were such a time!), but rather an academic analysis of trends and developments that have resulted in the current state of practice. The most important outcome of this endeavor will be to inform current and future EAP best practices. Virtually every professional field has such foundational documentation, and employee assistance should not be any different.

JEA: Five years ago, the EARF awarded its first research grants to the National Behavioral Consortium (NBC), to study the characteristics of external EAP providers; and to ISW Limits in Belgium, to examine the state of EAPs in six countries in Europe. In addition to contributing to the body of knowledge in employee assistance, what impact have these studies had on the EA field?

CT: I was initially concerned that constraints on our funding resources might limit the usefulness of these initial research grants. But the response and ultimate feedback indicated quite the opposite. Accurate metrics of actual EAP utilization and demographics were revealed in an unbiased study by independent researchers. For the first time, the field was not dependent on various marketing studies conducted by individuals and companies who, however well meaning, had their own stake in the game.

Conversely, the EARF-funded researchers did not have any vested interest in achieving a specific outcome, only to determine what was actually happening. NBC Executive Director Stan Granberry reported that

numerous spin-off studies were generated following the publication of NBC's research. The ISF survey was the most comprehensive review of EAP status in Europe to date. There remains much fertile ground for this type of objective survey research.

JEA: In 2013, EARF funded research for the OMNI Institute and Colorado State Employee Assistance Program to demonstrate the impact of EA services on employee productivity. What gains has this study led to in the profession, and have we found the right measures of productivity attributable to involvement in EA services?

CT: To my knowledge, this is the most rigorous study to date examining the workplace effects of EAP. It represents a major advance for the field because the study deployed large and carefully matched control groups of employees and then compared outcome metrics of EAP users to non-EAP users. This created the scientific rigor truly necessary to prove EAP impact on workplace outcomes.

Prior to this study, we had to rely on simplistic, single group designs where the best result was to demonstrate a correlation but not causality between EAP services and workplace outcomes. Now we have evidentiary science strongly suggesting that EAP caused the improved workplace outcomes. The EARF is proud to have sponsored this study and hopes EA professionals will employ it frequently when employers or consultants inquire into the value of EAPs.

JEA: More recently, the white paper, "Bridging Public Health with Workplace Behavioral Health Services," was co-sponsored by EAPA, EASNA, and EARF. What can you tell readers about the call to action this collaboration brought into view? Do you wish to drive more collaboration like this within the EA field?

CT: The EARF is keenly interested in encouraging our various trade associations and other allied professions to make "improved research" for the EA field a higher priority. We expect this white paper to be a catalyst to bring other stakeholders into our conversations, which have historically been rather insular and limited to our own narrow EAP constituency. There is great potential value in making EAP research an agenda item among leaders in health and productivity management, human resources, safety, labor, occupational health, government, and academia.

JEA: Looking back, Carl, what do you want us to know about the foundation, where it might be headed in the future, and any comments you would like to make about your many years of contributions to the EA profession?

CT: I believe the foundation has demonstrated that significant and relevant research can and should continue to be pursued and supported by all stakeholders, not just a few commercial entities. But this will take ongoing effort; hours of intensive volunteerism by the EARF Board of Directors, and the continued financial support of companies, associations, and individuals.

It has now been 45 years since the beginning of my EAP journey, and what a ride it has been! My most fervent desire going forward is that coming generations of young, talented professionals in this field will build upon the solid, scientifically-based underpinning being generated by the EARF's ongoing quality research, documentation, and publication.

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