

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

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supporting EAP professionals

'It Can Never Happen Here'

Suicide Postvention in the Workplace

By Sally Spencer-Thomas, Psy.D.

“Do you have posters to prevent suicide?” an employer asked a suicide prevention expert after the suicide of an employee had impacted the workplace. Mind you, this employer was not just any employer; it was a major airline in the U.S. In addition, the employee was not just any employee; he was a pilot.

The suicide prevention expert swallowed hard and suggested that a comprehensive suicide prevention approach including evidence-based training might be a more effective route than posters. They discussed the potential plans and cost-benefit analysis of several different options. However, over time, the employer stopped returning phone calls. The reactive moment passed and so did the interest.

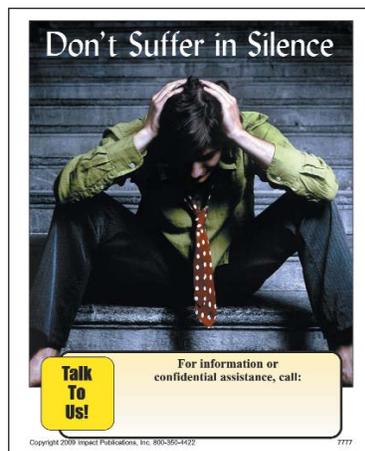
In a moment of frustration the suicide prevention expert thought, “The next time I [will] hear from you [will be] when your next suicidal pilot decided to die by suicide.”

Background

Sadly, suicide prevention and postvention are usually not on the minds of most business leaders until they find themselves in a crisis mode. Just as occurred for workplace violence prevention in the 1980s and 1990s, employers

often lull themselves into thinking, “It can never happen here.”

Today, any workplaces are far better prepared to handle a violent episode in the workplace — and yet, many are still ill-equipped to handle a suicide crisis.



For most countries, on-the-job suicides are relatively rare. For example, in the U.S., suicides at work only account for roughly 3.5% of all workplace fatalities (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). However, the numbers of completed suicides at work in the U.S. climbed 28% in 2008.

More recently, France has received a great deal of attention regarding work-related suicides. Ever since Telecom, Europe's 3rd largest phone company, started restructuring and cutting about 1/5 of its workforce, the company has experienced 26 suicides, which is somewhat higher than the national

average. What makes these suicides so alarming, though, is that many of the people who died expressed a direct connection to workplace stress in their reasons to take their own lives.

Some engaged in suicidal behavior at work or in front of colleagues, while others wrote notes that left little doubt of their motivation including one that read, “I am committing suicide because of my work at France Telecom. That's the only reason.”

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The Impact of Suicide at Work

In the aftermath of a suicide in the workplace, special care must be taken to assess the impact on witnesses, responders (especially internal public safety professionals who might know the deceased), and company stakeholders (i.e., suppliers or customers who might have known the deceased).

Unfortunately, for workplaces in a reactive mode, the initial response is to deny the effect on the workplace or its contributing role in the death — and as a result, to create distance between the crisis and workplace operations. This approach often makes the situation far worse for the co-workers suffering from the trauma and grief resulting from the suicide.

Some may be moved to get involved in suicide-prevention efforts as part of their path to recovery, while others may mobilize to get increased training in the workplace.

For example, Dr. Paul Quinnett, the founding principal for the internationally acclaimed QPR Institute (suicide prevention gatekeeper training), was asked to provide a support session to help the staff of a workplace impacted by the suicide of an employee.

When preparing for this session, the Human Resources Director of the workplace asked, “*What do you need?*” Dr. Quinnett answered, “*Drinking water, tissues. and a quiet room where people can't look in.*”

The Human Resources Director then noted, “*Okay, that is fine, but I should let you know that it is our company policy that*

you can't use the word 'suicide' at this workplace.”

Twenty-five people attended the session, but the expectation set by the leadership was that they would just talk *around* the issue for an hour. While the employer had good intentions of giving the staff support, restrictions like this were clearly counterproductive.

The following list of suggestions offer alternative strategies that might be used in the workplace for a more effective approach to postvention:

➤ ***When a suicide attempt or completion occurs at the workplace an appropriately appointed person should notify family members in a timely manner.*** Clean up of the death scene should be handled by an external organization with extreme sensitivity to the surviving staff and without the expectation that it will appear as though, “*nothing ever happened.*” At the same time, memorializing the death site should be avoided.

➤ ***The suicide of an employee off-site is usually equally troubling to co-workers, and other types of workplace relationships.*** For instance, the suicides of vendors, clients, and family members of employees can all cause trauma and grieving and disrupt the functioning of a workplace.

➤ ***The impact of a suicide attempt of an employee can also have a profound effect on workplace functioning.*** While it is beyond the scope of this article to address the nuances of each of these scenarios, some of the general principles of postvention discussed in this article (and in this month's *Brown Bagger* insert) will apply to many.

Post-Suicide Crisis Management and Support

According to Bob VandePol,

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president of Crisis Care Network and consultant to Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), “*how leaders respond during the first hours after a disaster offers both tremendous opportunity and serious risk for the subsequent outcomes.*” (**Editor's note:** His ACT Model is described in this month's *Brown Bagger* insert.)

Co-Workers and Postvention

If appropriate, co-workers should be allowed to participate in

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mourning rituals (e.g., funerals, memorial services, etc.), and even create a keepsake such as a memory scrapbook or quilt for the surviving family.

Just as with other deaths that impact the workplace, co-workers can bring easy-to-heat up and nutritious frozen meals to grieving family (e.g., a big batch of chicken soup is especially comforting).

If the deceased was a co-worker, employees may offer the family assistance by packing up the personal belongings of the individual's desk or office, and delivering the contents to an appropriate location.

Co-workers most impacted by the suicide may need to access mental health services and may benefit from other support services. Some may be moved to get involved in suicide-prevention efforts as part of their path to recovery, while others may mobilize to get increased training in the workplace.

Summary

Around the world, workplaces seem to be some of the last major systems to acknowledge the impact of suicide — and yet, as Sue Shellenbarger once wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, “The workplace is the last crucible of sustained human contact for many of the 30,000 people who kill themselves each year in the U.S. A co-worker's suicide has a deep, disturbing impact on workmates. For managers, such tragedies pose challenges no one covered in management school.” ■

Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas, Psy.D., is a psychologist, survivor of her brother's suicide, and Executive Director of the Colorado-based Carson J Spencer Foundation. For more information on suicide prevention, intervention or postvention training, visit www.carson-jspencer.org, www.workingminds.org or contact her at Sally@CarsonJSpencer.org.



Editor's Notebook

Parties, tooting horns, and New Year's resolutions may not seem the right time to address a topic like suicide in this space. Then again, is the time EVER right to discuss such a serious subject?

Besides, EA professionals work in a field that deals firsthand with misfortunate and adverse events. And as we all know, life has its share of fun, excitement — and tragedies — including a good friend of mine, who took his life in 2008.

I had the good fortunate of meeting Sally Spencer-Thomas,

executive director of the Carson J Spencer Foundation, at the recent World EAP Conference in Tampa.

It was an unexpected bonus that Sally, a noted authority on this subject, was able to assist with cover and *Brown Bagger* articles. I encourage readers to check out her sites: www.workingminds.org and www.carsonjspencer.org.

Thanks for your time and talent Sally! Until next month. In the mean time, happy new year to all.

Mike Jacquot
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Quick Ideas

Try These Email Tips!

In a letter to the editor in *Harvard Business Review OnPoint* (Fall 2010), Rita Gunther McGrath shared “Rita's Golden Rules for Email”:

➤ **Don't keep forwarding the same email.** This is a huge offender. It's very easy to just hit “reply” all the time. The problem is, when you don't create a *new* email message when necessary, you run the risk of confusing the recipient.

➤ **A subject line should reflect what the message is about.** This is similar to the previous point. If the subject line doesn't have anything to do with your message, you need to change the subject line. Period. Don't make busy people guess what your email is about.

➤ **Keep it short.** Excessive forwarding and lengthy messages can cause a great deal of confusion. No email should be longer than one screen of information.

➤ **Keep it simple.** PLEASE, one subject per email. After you've dealt with an item, delete it.

However, you can't do that if the email contains 10 action items.

➤ **Stick to business.** Email is the wrong place for communications of a personal nature. Email is also the wrong place for emotional outbursts. Keep such discussions private, preferably in a closed office.

➤ **Play it safe.** Assume that everything you put in an email could end up on the front page of the *New York Times* and be accordingly discreet.

➤ **Never assume.** Because you sent it doesn't mean I got it. Because I got it doesn't mean I read it. Because I read it doesn't mean I understood it. Because I understood it doesn't mean I agree with you. In other words, never assume.

Finally, know when to call and when to email. Don't send an email when a short phone call would work better. ■

Additional source: ExchangeEveryDay, a free service of “Exchange” magazine (www.ccie.com).

Employee Training a Key Concern

Even with all the monetary cutbacks in today's workplaces, continuing education remains a leading concern for Human Resource managers, a recent OfficeTeam study discovered.

"As workers take on expanded responsibilities, it becomes more important for companies to offer professional development to help their teams keep up," said OfficeTeam executive director Robert Hosking. "Training programs boost job satisfaction for employees by enabling them to build new skills and take on more challenging roles."

"Training programs boost job satisfaction for employees by enabling them to build new skills and take on more challenging roles."

Workplace Redefined, a recent Robert Half study that examined the attitudes of multiple generations of workers, showed that professionals of all ages value ongoing education.

"Job security is on everyone's minds, and having up-to-date skills is the key to staying relevant and marketable," noted Hosking. "By providing training opportunities, companies demonstrate they're committed to their employees' long-term career growth, which can help with their retention efforts."

For more on this study, check out www.roberthalf.us/workplace_redefined. ■

Source: OfficeTeam — www.officeteam.com — a leading staffing service specializing in the temporary placement of highly skilled office and administrative support professionals.

On the Job

Negotiating with a Control Freak Boss

By Jim Camp

Several national studies have found that the leading reason employees are stressed out or dissatisfied in their jobs is "lack of control."

Does your over-controlling boss refuse to listen to great ideas? Deprive employees of needed resources or processes to do their jobs well? Or, does he or she not recommend worthy employees for promotions or challenging assignments?

If so, the following recommendations may help:

➤ **Cool your jets.** Before you talk to your boss, clear your mind of all emotions — anger, anticipation, fear, etc. Don't say or do anything that conveys emotion.

➤ **Identify the elephants in the room.** Before the meeting, write down the problems you foresee standing in your way. Bring them out into the open.

➤ **Invite your boss to say "no."** This negotiating technique works. Start the conversation by telling him or her that you're comfortable with a no answer and you want him/her to be comfortable saying no. This puts anyone — especially a control freak — at ease.

➤ **Get to the heart of the problem.** Ask questions starting with why, what, and how to get the boss revealing what him/her worries about most, and how you might be able to help. Present your proposal as the answer to the problem.

➤ **Base your motive and purpose on your boss's world.** The purpose for the meeting should fulfill the boss's needs or it won't be worth his or her time. For instance, if you want your boss to provide the people and funding for a new project, be prepared with solid, quantifiable reasons.

➤ **Focus on what you CAN control.** The only thing you can control in a dialogue is *your* behavior and responses. Listen carefully and answer questions in such a way that you're always keeping your boss's goals in mind — not yours. ■

Jim Camp is an internationally sought negotiation coach and trainer, and author of [NO: The Only Negotiating System You Need for Work and Home](http://www.startwithno.com). For more information, check out www.startwithno.com.

Making Work-Life Balance More than Lip Service

By Ilyse Shapiro

Many companies seem to be offering opportunities for work/life balance. Casual dress Fridays, free dry cleaning pick-up, and the ability to bring your dog to the office may be nice, but what is the employer really trying to say by offering these “perks”?

Could it be instead that you’ve run out of clean clothes and you work so much you don’t have time to perform simple errands or take care of your pet?

Businesses need to consider these tips before soliciting the EA professional’s help in putting together a work/life balance program:

❖ **Make sure the firm’s culture supports work/life initiatives.** It’s great to tell staff that the organization offers flexibility, but management must embrace and encourage the concept themselves. Only then should a formal pro-

gram be put in place that is both flexible and continuous.

❖ **Effective work/life balance programs are not discriminatory.** They must consider ALL employees as equals, regardless of sex, race, income level, job title, etc.

❖ **Don’t pit employees against each other.** Many workers fear that they will face repercussions — co-worker animosity and management scrutiny — if they take advantage of flexible options. Effective supervisors must ensure that staff does not encounter this type of negative feedback.

❖ **Continue career advancement and training opportunities.** Staff members who work flexible schedules should be offered the same opportunities as those who work traditional, full-time schedules. ■

Ilyse Shapiro is the founder of www.myparttimepro.com — a job-search website that connects employers with dedicated individuals seeking meaningful, flexible employment opportunities.

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Resources

🔗 *Malpractice Dangers for Psychiatrists* is an online article directed toward psychiatrists, but the information is important for all mental health practitioners. Check out www.medscape.com/viewarticle/714110. Membership is required.

🔗 *CareConnect USA* — located on the Web at www.careconnectusa.org — features a debt relief hotline: 800-453-1738, which is designed to put callers in direct contact with an expert counselor to assist with debt relief needs.

🔗 *Patient Records Legal Primer* contains what professionals need to know about keeping, transferring, and destroying patient records. Visit www.athealth.com/apps/redirect.cfm?linkid=340.

🔗 *Just Stand.org* is a new website designed to help educate workers about the economic importance of standing more throughout the workday. Visit <http://juststand.org>.

🔗 *Job Accommodation Network*, a service of the U.S. Department of Labor, maintains information and scores of accommodation suggestions on a wide variety of disabilities. Visit <http://askjan.org>

🔗 *The National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies*, at www.naccrra.org — is an organization that works to ensure that families have access to quality, affordable child care.

Which Direction are YOU Headed?

By Gary Foreman

I heard an interesting statement recently, which said that, “*the direction you’re facing is more important than where you are in the journey.*” This seemed to ring true in terms of personal finances, and it seemed like a good New Year’s topic to address.

Please don’t misunderstand. Where you are standing today IS important — especially if you’re 60 years old and facing retirement with limited savings.

However, where you are is still a reflection of what you’ve done in the past. That’s important, but it’s still the *past*. You can’t change what’s already happened.

On the other hand, you CAN change where you’ll go in the future! To do that, you need to consider which direction you’re facing — and you need to be sure you’re moving in the right direction.

You may need to do some number crunching to answer these questions. However, by the time you



finish reading this article you’ll have a better idea if you’re at least heading in the right direction.

✓ Is your net worth increasing or decreasing? One tool to calculate your net worth is available at www.stretcher.com/stories/01/010101r.cfm.

✓ Are you adding to your monthly expenses? Or, are you cutting monthly costs?

✓ Have you acquired new skills to perform home repairs? Are you using them?

✓ Have you learned new skills that make you more valuable at work?

✓ Have you developed financial goals? Are you monitoring your journey toward those goals?

✓ How do you feel about your finances? Confident? Concerned?

✓ Would you be embarrassed if other people knew about your *real* financial situation?

✓ Do you have more — or less -credit card debt than you did a year ago?

✓ Do you know more about your finances than you did six months ago?

✓ Do you have enough money to survive a six-month loss of income? If not, are you making progress toward this goal?

✓ Are you attempting to learn more about personal finance on a regular basis?

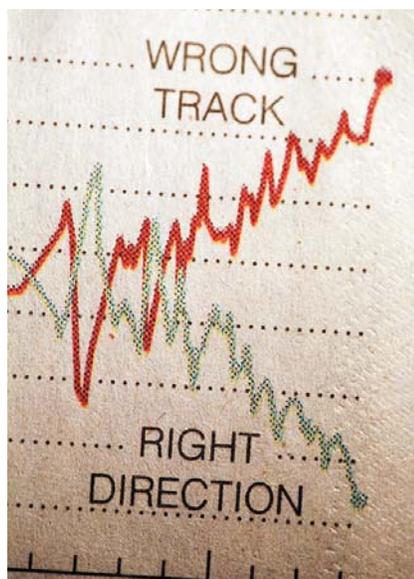
✓ Do you believe you can make a difference in your finances? Or, do you ignore your financial affairs?

Summary

Admittedly, some of these questions are subjective — and, as mentioned, it would probably take a calculator and old bank or credit card statement to accurately answer at least a few of these queries.

However, the gist of the story remains that it’s not difficult to get a good handle on which *general* direction you’re going financially. Of course there are two final questions: “*Which direction are YOU facing?*” and, “*What are you going to do about it?*” ■

Gary Foreman is the editor of the Dollar Stretcher website (www.stretcher.com) and various e-newsletters. The Dollar Stretcher is dedicated to helping people live better on the money they already have.



Overcome 'Budget Busters'

❖ **Budget Buster #1 — Negative Attitude** — If you think of budgeting in negative terms, such as penny-pinching, sacrifices, etc., you're sure to fail. Overcoming this budget buster involves recognizing that postponing the instant gratification of spending all the money you earn is worth the rewards you'll gain in the long run.

❖ **Budget Buster #2 — Lack of Motivation** — What is your motivation for budgeting? Complying

with the terms of a consumer credit counseling agency? This isn't necessarily bad, but it's an external pressure that will probably not be easy to maintain over time. The best motivations are internal, such as a belief that budgeting can help you meet financial goals.

❖ **Budget Buster #3 — Unrealistic Expectations** — In today's instant gratification society, the cold hard fact is that budgeting is an endurance event. Those who stick with it will reap

the rewards. Don't expect miracles overnight. However, if you stick with it, you will see steady, measurable progress.

Summary

Include overcoming "budget busters" in your goals for the new year, and watch your personal finances improve in 2011. ■

Sources: *About.com/Financial Planning with Deborah Fowles*; and *Money Clues for the Clueless*, Promise Press/Barbour Publishing.

Workplace Study

Workplace Wellness Saves Money: Study

A Midwest utility company learned firsthand that it pays to keep healthy employees fit, reaping a net savings of \$4.8 million in employee health and lost work time costs over nine years, according to a University of Michigan study.

Over the nine years, the utility company spent \$7.3 million for the program and showed \$12.1 million in savings associated with participation. Medical and pharmacy costs, time off, and worker's compensation factored into the savings.

The findings are good news for companies looking to implement wellness programs, according to Dee Edington, director of the U-M Health Management Research Center and principal investigator.

"One of the advantages of the study is it shows that a sustainable program will give you savings," said Edington, also a professor in

the School of Kinesiology and a research scientist in the U-M School of Public Health. "Previous studies looked at programs that are short and intense and cover the same people."

The U-M study differed in three important ways:

1. The study showed that wellness programs work long-term, even though the employees who participated aged during the study.

2. The study took into account all bottom-line costs for implementing the wellness plan. For instance, indirect costs such as recruitment and costs for changing menus. Most studies include just the direct costs to the company for paying employees who participate. But even using the conservative U-M figures showed a cost savings.

3. The study looked at lost work time as well as pharmacy and medical costs. The employ-

ees who participated in *all* years saw those costs had increased by \$96; those who participated in *some* of the years rose \$230; and costs for those who *never* participated jumped by \$355. All told, the program cost \$100 per year per employee whether the employee participated or not.

Therefore, a participation-related savings of \$257 and \$125 was calculated for employees who participated in all years — and those who participated in just some years.

Slowly, companies are realizing that while insurance plans must care for sick employees, those plans must also include wellness plans to keep health workers healthy, Edington summarized. ■

Source: *University of Michigan News Service. For more information on the University of Michigan School of Kinesiology visit www.kines.umich.edu.*

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Looking Back, Looking Ahead

By Mike Jacquart

With scores of conference sessions, even pre-conference sessions, and plenty of networking opportunities, there was never a lack of things to do at EAPA's Annual World EAP Conference, held Oct. 6-9 in Tampa, FL.

It was a great pleasure to meet a number of *EAR* supporters and contributors for the first time. In an electronic world that's increasingly too impersonal, there's nothing quite like face-to-face contact.

In addition, while everyone enjoys renewing old acquaintances, I also had the opportunity to meet quite a few *new* EA professionals as well. This included Sally Spencer-Thomas, author of

the cover and *Brown Bagger* articles in this month's newsletter.

My biggest surprise was the number of EA professionals that I met from across the globe. I counted something like 7 or 8 different countries: Portugal, Argentina, Israel, England, and others.

I was impressed that so many people would travel that far to network and learn more about their profession. Reports of 17- or 18-hour flights (and perhaps some were even longer than that) were common.

The sessions I attended included "EAP in Latin America: Development and Cultural Differences," "Building Business by Blogging," and Saturday's concluding Crucial Issues Forum

about EA Services Online, "Let Your Fingers Do the Talking."

In terms of EAP trends, it seemed clear that online therapy will become more prevalent in the near future — perhaps it's already here for *you*. While drawbacks to online counseling were raised, benefits were also presented.

These sessions and contacts provided a goldmine of information that I plan to translate into additional stories in *EAR* and the *JEA* this year.

My only regret was the lack of time to meet even more dedicated employee assistance professionals, and to attend more of the informative sessions. All in all, kudos to EAPA on an event well done! ■

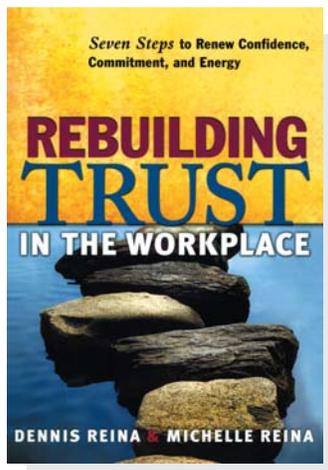
Book Review

'Rebuilding Trust in the Workplace'

Are you feeling less engaged, less committed, and more skeptical at work? Do you find yourself isolated? If so, you may be experiencing the symptoms of broken trust in workplace relationships.

Small but hurtful situations accumulate over time into the confidence-busting, commitment-breaking, energy-draining patterns consistent with broken trust.

In today's anxiety-riddled, uncertain economic climate, it's quite possible that such sentiments — though often unspoken — are more common than ever.



However, Dennis Reina and Michelle Reina's new book, *Rebuilding Trust in the*

Workplace: Seven Steps to Renew Confidence, Commitment, and Energy, offers a proven seven-step process to heal pain and rebuild trust. This compassionate, practical approach will help you reframe the experience, take responsibility, forgive, let go, and move on.

Through healing, you will want to go to work again. Even better yet, you'll give your organization better thinking and productivity.

Rebuilding Trust in the Workplace retails for \$19.95, from Berrett-Koehler Publishers, www.bkconnection.com. ■