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EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

supporting EAP professionals

Affordable Care Organizations & Potential Impact on EAPs

By David Worster

Discussion of Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs) has increased significantly with Congress' passage of the *Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act* (*PPACA*), which establishes ACOs as a new payment model under Medicare.

The *PPACA* and the *Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act* comprise the health care reform signed into law last year.

> ***"Should EA practitioners and EA professional organizations fail to arrive at a consensus to meet this challenge; we are likely to find ourselves with solutions being imposed upon us..."***

The bills focus on revising the private health insurance market, providing better coverage for individuals with pre-existing conditions, improving prescription drug coverage under Medicare, and extending the life of the Medicare Trust Fund.

The laws have already received legal challenges regarding its constitutionality, which the Supreme Court could review as early as the end of 2011.

However, regardless of the specifics and subsequent controversy, the overall premise behind the *PPACA* - better known as the *Affordable Care Act* - remains important for EA practitioners to understand given its potential impact on employee assistance programs.

Faults of Current System

A New Hampshire Citizen's Health Initiative presentation recently noted that the current payment structure in the U.S. health care system focuses too much on:

- The *volume* of service delivered rather than outcomes;
- *Paying* for services, whether they are needed or not;
- Valuing *specialty services* and *expensive technology* over primary care; and
- Failing to pay for *physician-patient consultation* and activities involved in the coordination of care.

These failings have resulted in the U.S. paying close to 20% of our national GNP on health care while consistently being ranked last among industrialized countries in terms of health care outcomes. Premiums for health insurance have spiraled out of control, and employers are signaling their unwillingness to continue in this fashion. Given the realization that Medicare and Medicaid are facing budget shortfalls and possible bankruptcy, it is clear that the time for action cannot be delayed.

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Background on ACOs

Supporters believe that ACOs will allow the health care system to:

- ➢ Work more effectively;
- ➢ Reduce overuse of medical care; and
- ➢ Improve health care outcomes, while concurrently slowing the growth of health care spending.

There is no single, well-accepted definition of ACOs, but there *is* general agreement that ACOs would likely be made up of groups of providers – physicians, hospitals and/or others – that, together, provide care and share accountability for the cost and quality of care for a population of patients. (This is commonly known as capitation.)

Most ACO models envision comprehensive, meaningful measures that would flow from an interconnected, electronic health records infrastructure, and support providers' efforts to improve outcomes across the full continuum of care - while ensuring accountability to payers, patients, and policymakers.

One potential approach would be to create different levels of ACOs based on different payment models that would require distinct levels of organizational structure and accreditation. Commonly cited examples of existing ACO prototypes include the Kaiser Permanente health plans, Mayo Clinic, and Cleveland Clinic.

Public and private payers would hold provider organizations accountable by assessing whether they provided high-quality care to their usual patient population while reducing the unnecessary use of resources.

Provider organizations that take steps to improve their performance would be financially rewarded; which would encourage further steps to improve care management, and in turn, lead to additional rewards and a steady evolution toward fully coordinated care systems.

While early ACO demonstration projects have shown mixed results, the concept is new enough that it remains a work in progress. As such, it will evolve over time as experience demonstrates best practice.

Improving Performance Measurement

According to Stephen Shortell, MPH; and Elliott Fisher, MPH and MD, success of the ACO concept will depend in large part on whether payers and health system leaders can, "work together to establish a tightly linked performance measurement and evaluation framework that not only ensures accountability to patients and payers, but also supports rapid learning, timely correction of policy and organizational missteps and broad dissemination of successful organizational and practice innovations."

Current measurement strategies too often:

- ➢ Assess individual clinicians and silos of care;
- ➢ Focus on processes of questionable importance;
- ➢ Are imposed as an add-on to current workloads; and
- ➢ Require burdensome chart reviews and auditing or reliance on out-of-date administrative claims data.

Poor performance is too often seen as a consequence of individual failure, rather than on flawed *systems*.

The evolution to more scientific strategies for quality improvement and progress in health information technology has led to an emerging national consensus that new approaches to performance measurement are, in fact, achievable.

Longitudinal measurement of key processes and outcomes will be an integral part of all care delivery in order to support continuous quality improvement as well as accountability.

Specific, overall outcomes have been identified. They include: improving population health,

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engaging patients in making decisions and managing their care, improving patient safety and care coordination, guaranteeing compassionate and appropriate end-of-life care, and eliminating waste.

Implications for EA Practice

Just as managed care had a profound impact on EA service delivery systems in the early 1990s, ACOs promise to have an equally important influence on how we work and the models we work in.

Meanwhile, the process of implementing ACOs is not happening in a vacuum. Anecdotal reports indicate that:

- ➢ Employers are increasingly requesting that "on-site" EA presence be part of the services they receive;
- ➢ EAPs are continuing to struggle with parity rules that categorize EAPs as a group health plan; and
- ➢ Economic pressures are still impacting government bottom lines, leading to problems with access to services.

Private insurance companies are beginning to adopt ACO concepts under pressure from employers to reduce healthcare costs. Where "cost shifting" and annual increases in reimbursement used to be the norm, health care organizations will now be reimbursed based on sets of performance data against standardized "best practice" measures established by the federal government.

In New Hampshire, we have *already* seen one major insurer recently negotiate a contract with a hospital that significantly reduced their reimbursement based on these outcome data.

Should ACOs demonstrate cost savings, business leaders are likely to embrace the concept just as they did managed care. Businesses are already becoming more accustomed to receiving data in outcome format, and they are seeking to expand this paradigm to other services.

EAPs may well be asked to provide standardized outcome data in order to justify their expense. A core meaning or understanding in this development will be necessary in order to:

- ➢ Identify standardized organizational outcomes to be benchmarked;
- ➢ Establish agreed-upon and consistent definitions all EAPs would adhere to when providing data; and
- ➢ Agree on measurable best practices that would be part of all EA services.

Summary

Clearly, barriers to implementing this process exist. These obstacles include, but are not limited to: *the commoditization of EAPs* that has resulted in outcome information being classified as proprietary; *the shift from staff model EAPs to a network model*, which complicates measurement processes; *the blurring distinction between behavioral health and EAP services*; and a *lack of agreed-upon definitions and outcome statements*.

Should EA practitioners and EA professional organizations fail to arrive at a consensus to meet this challenge; we are likely to find ourselves with solutions being imposed upon us - just as was the case with managed care 20 years ago. ■

David Worster, LICSW, LISW-CP, CEAP, is the EAP Director with Concord Hospital in Concord, NH. He is also a long-time contributor to EAR.

Editor's Notebook

I hate to single people out sometimes for fear of forgetting someone. However, David Worster, author of this month's cover article, is one of those special contributors that busy editors treasure because they can be counted on to provide solid articles each and every year.

In fact, Dave's contributions to this newsletter date back even farther than me, and I've been editing *EAR* since 2004! I was thrilled to finally meet Dave at the World EAP Conference in Tampa last fall. (Dave was the president of EAPA before handing over the gavel to Jeff Christie last year.)

More important, Dave's cover article on **health care reform** is one of few I've read about its impact on the EA profession. I hope you'll value his insights as much as I do.

Now that I've given Dave a swelled head, I guess that's about about all I have to say this month.

Oops, don't forget to check out our new blog at impactpublishing.wordpress.com. Spring has finally sprung! Until next time.

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Avoiding Email Rage

Have you heard of email rage? This occurs when people react to an insult in an email – real or imagined – and immediately fire off an angry reply.

However, a knee-jerk reaction could ruin friendships, damage your reputation, get you fired, or kill your chances for promotion.

According to Career Builder, people tend to leap to defend themselves when a co-worker misinterprets something they said, and they send an accusatory email to half the company.

Or, when someone receives an email filled with exclamation points, and words in all caps – which is the Internet equivalent of shouting. In a recent survey, 26% of companies say they've fired an employee for misusing email!

Linda Stone, who worked for both Microsoft and Apple, calls this "email apnea." She coined the phrase after researching and observing people under the influence of email. She noticed that most of us have a compulsion to respond quickly to emails.

Before employees with a corporate client send an angry reply, they should try these tips:

❖ **Resist the urge to "let someone have it."** The individual should open a new email, but don't put any names in the address slots. Once he/she is finished venting, delete it – or stick it in a "drafts" box – and move on.

❖ **Vent OFFLINE**. For example, the worker should ask a trusted friend to offer perspective when he/she is hopping mad. Bottom line: You can't undo the damage once you press 'send.'

❖ **Think before you act**. If there is an issue with a co-worker, it's never a good idea to create an electronic trail that can be forwarded, printed, and referred to repeatedly. Studies show that people misjudge the tone of an email almost half of the time, and people feel freer to express themselves in email because they don't have to look the person in the eye. However, thinking before acting could mean serious consequences to deal with later.

Summary

Long story short, if the message is something that a person wouldn't say to someone's face, don't put it in an email. Talk to the individual in private instead. ■

Additional source: John Tesh, Intelligence for Your Life (www.tesh.com).

In the News

Best Places to Work - A Partial List

Even in a tough job market, some employers dole out perks like on-site saunas, discounted massages and classes on Wii bowling. *Fortune* magazine's latest list of the top 10 places to work are:

1) SAS
2) Edward Jones
3) Wegmans
4) Google
5) Nugget Market
6) DreamWorks Animation
7) NetApp
8) Boston Consulting Group
9) Qualcomm
10) Camden Property Trust

For a complete list of the 100 best companies to work for, visit http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/bestcompanies/2010/full_list/. ■

Social Media Conduct: Part I

By Richard Weinblatt

The rise of social networking has its supporters and detractors. Some lament the workplace distractions - and even stalking or harassment; while others point to the the teamwork and productivity that can result.

The key for supervisors and executives is to recognize uses and abuses, and what steps should be taken to control adverse actions.

The following are two recommendations that can be implemented in any workplace. Two additional suggestions will be presented next month.

❖ *Have clear policies*. Very specific policies need to be in place that govern use of the Internet and social networking sites. While some organizations may find it easier to just ban access altogether, this is akin to throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

A middle-of-the-road approach is probably more appropriate for most employers. Have employees sign policies indicating that they have read, understood and had the opportunity to ask questions.

❖ *Educate everyone*. Make sure that supervisors, as well as employees, understand what is expected as far as social networking conduct in the workplace. While you're at it, reinforce sexual harassment, related issues, and their relevant consequences even when they're taking place within the virtual world.

Employees that bash the workplace online can be heading to a heartache-laden experience for everyone. While free speech and whistleblower protections exist, laws vary from state to state, employees may not be on as solid footing as they thought when confronted with disparaging comments they posted online about an employer or co-worker.

NEXT MONTH: Technological precautions and monitoring usage will be discussed. ■

Dr. Richard Weinblatt, The Cop Doc, is a former police chief, ex-criminal justice professor, and past police academy director who is an expert on police, crime, and safety topics. To find out more, visit www.thecopdoc.com.

Workplace Survey

Remote Work an Individual Decision

Technology is making working from home, or while traveling on the job, more attractive to many employees than ever.

However, OfficeTeam cautions that telecommuting – also known as telework – does not work for everyone and for every position.

OfficeTeam suggests that employees considering working off-site ask themselves the following questions before making the request to management (the EA professional may be able to assist):

✓ *Does the company have a remote work policy?* Review the employee manual or contact human resources to find out. If no policy exists, research how other companies have established successful remote work arrangements.

✓ *What's in it for them?* Managers will respond more favorably to the request if they know the arrangement will benefit the company and not just the individual. For instance, will the arrangement save the company money or increase productivity?

✓ *Have you thought through the details?* The supervisor will want to know information such as, why the individual is a good telework candidate, any technological tools and upgrades that may be needed, and what security measures are in place at home to protect company information.

✓ *How self-motivated are you?* Working from home or another off-site location could be very challenging for those who are easily distracted or lack self-discipline.

✓ *How will you stay in touch?* The telework employee needs a plan for interacting with colleagues off-site to ensure that projects stay on track.

✓ *Offer the arrangement on a trial basis*. A supervisor may be more receptive to trying a telework arrangement if the individual proposes it on a trial basis – say, working remotely one or two days a week. Arrange several meetings with the boss throughout the test period so both can evaluate how the arrangement is working. With a little bit of "tweaking," the supervisor may be willing to allow telework for longer periods of time. ■

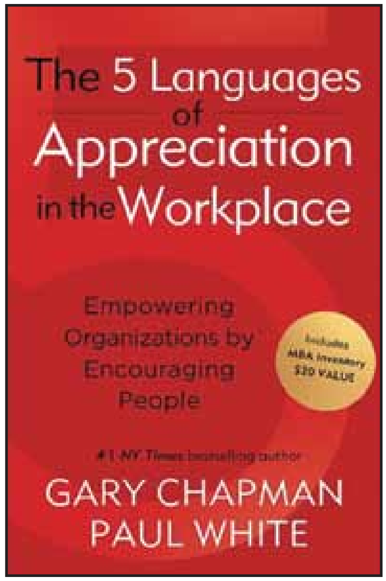
Disgruntled Workers? These Ideas can Help

Employers know their employees are getting worn down in today's "do more with less" workplaces. They want to show their appreciation, but they don't know how in these uncertain economic times.

Fortunately, based on the concepts from the *New York Times* best-selling book, *5 Love Languages*, Dr. Gary Chapman and Dr. Paul White provide effective ways to communicate appreciation and encouragement without spending a lot of money. The following are some suggestions:

❖ **Recognition and appreciation must be individualized and delivered personally**. People want appreciation that is genuine. Employees are skeptical of programs where supervisors are instructed to, "communicate appreciation to each team member at least once a week."

❖ **Appreciation needs to be viewed as valuable by the recipient in order to make an impact**. Individuals have specific ways in which they prefer to be encouraged. The challenge is to know what actions "hit the mark" to effectively communicate appreciation to an employee. An instrument at www.mbainventory.com can help business leaders determine which language and actions are most meaningful.



❖ **Appreciation needs to be communicated using the recipient's preferred language**. When messages are sent repeatedly in ways outside of an individual's primary language, the intent of the message "misses the mark." Not only is this ineffective, it becomes discouraging as well - to both the sender and the receiver of the message.

A Starting Point

Obviously, it is best to know exactly what is meaningful to employees and colleagues. However, there are also common actions that can serve as a starting point. Managers, supervisors, and co-workers should try one of the following:

✓ **Write an email** such as, *"I just wanted to let you know. ..."*

✓ **Stop by and see how a colleague is doing**. Spend a few minutes just chatting and checking in on them.

✓ **Perform a small task for someone simultaneously**. Hold open the door, offer to carry something, etc.

✓ **Buy them coffee, a snack,** *dessert*, etc. People always enjoy food!

✓ **Give them a "high five" when a task has been completed**. This is particularly appreciated when a project has been especially challenging or one the employee has been working on a while.

For more information, visit www.appreciationatwork.com. The book, *5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace*, will be released this summer. ■

Resources

📖 ***The Art of Leading: Three Principles for Predictable Performance Improvement***, by Wally Hauck, ISBN: 0982959109, www.wallyhauck.com. The author postulates that *effective* leadership is scarce in government and corporations. As a result, Hauck outlines basic leadership principles in order to build a successful foundation for employee engagement.

📖 ***Windmill Networking: Understanding, Leveraging & Maximizing LinkedIn***, by Neal Schaffer, http://windmillnetworking. Schaffer presents an insightful, and yet easy-to-use manual for professionals that want to get the most out of LinkedIn, which has more than 65 million members worldwide.

📖 ***The Custom-Fit Workplace: Choose When, Where, and How to Work and Boost Your Bottom Line***, by Joan Blades and Nanette Fondas, http://customfitworkplace.org. This research-based book presents flexible tactics to help workers integrate their work and home responsibilities, and allow managers to tap into their key asset: their employees.

Manage Ethnic Tension in the Workplace: Part II

By Kyle Scott

Last month, I presented the first in a three-point plan that can help management in ANY sector to better handle diversity and manage ethnic tension in the workplace. The following are the remaining two points:

❖ **People Matter**: This is related to the issue of size I presented last time, but it is still important to remember that people matter, and they matter for at least two reasons: (1) *People must be involved in decision-making procedures*. (2) *There are natural leaders and natural followers within any group*.

On the first point: people have a natural desire to communicate and have input. To close them off will only lead to animosity and perhaps lead them to look for some person or group to blame or take their frustration out on while not knowing why they feel alienated.

Moreover, if you do not include the people in the decision-making process you may never learn what the true problem is or what solutions might be available. More input, when funneled through constructive channels, is always good.

Second, you must know which people are likely to lead and which are likely to follow if you want to know if the leaders are leading in a positive direction. In this respect, size and people come together as an organization.

❖ **Leaders Matter**: Aside from natural leaders, there are those within organizations who are placed in official positions of power and authority that must be able to handle the difficult situations associated with diversity. Leaders must be able to work within the system to address problems and be sensitive to the needs of the people within the organization.

Promoting from within an organization that is designed to identify the natural leaders will not only recognize those leaders but will cultivate the necessary values in those leaders so that when they take an official leadership role their efforts will be genuine.

Summary

Every organization is different and every workplace is different, therefore the strategies employed to address the unique problems that arise within diverse populations need to be dynamic and adaptable.

A static set of rules will always fail as it will not be able to address the dynamic nature of people and their needs. ■

Kyle Scott is a lecturer at the University of Houston, and author of the soon-to-be-released Federalism: Theory and Practice.

Marketing Matters

Hints for Effective Networking

By Barbara Bergstrom

Networking events come in all shapes and sizes. The "speed networking" get together or the "talk to everyone in 3 minute intervals," event are spin-offs of speed dating. "Business after Hours" has been around forever. In addition, organizations meet regularly for lunch and specific events labeled "networking" or "meet and greets."

For some, these events fill a social need as well as enabling professionals to make specific contacts. A networking opportunity is especially helpful for the start-up businessperson or small business representative.

Don't fool yourself into thinking that you don't need these events. You will find the movers and shakers in the competitive business arena are at the same events and they are "working the room" as seasoned professionals.

The following suggestions should

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Leading Tech Etiquette Breaches

In the days when "tweets" were bird sounds and "text" was a book, workplace blunders had a limited audience. Now, however, these missteps can receive broad exposure, and with unhappy consequences.

Three out of four (76%) human resources (HR) managers polled by Robert Half said technology etiquette breaches can affect a person's career prospects. The following are the top breaches:

➢ ***The Venter***. This indiscreet individual never misses an opportunity to document a bad work situation. Job-related gripes get splashed across Facebook, Twitter, and a personal blog. Email, too, takes a decidedly negative tone.

Advice: To avoid this label, the employee must keep information that's posted *positive*. Sticky or unpleasant situations are best discussed offline and in private.

➢ ***The Noise Polluter***. This person's phone seems to lack a silent mode or an off button. Whether in a meeting or at a colleague's desk, he or she freely takes and makes calls, oblivious to his surroundings. Between noisy ring tones and broadcasts of personal conversations, it's impossible to concentrate when this employee is nearby.

Advice: To keep office noise at a minimum, phones should be set on silent, and personal conversations held behind closed doors.

➢ ***The Cryptic Communicator***. This person relies on texting shorthand for *every* type of correspondence. Informal abbreviations, poor punctuation, and spelling and grammatical goofs leave workers pleading for clarification.

Advice: Slow down, and take it easy on abbreviations. Spending more time on messages can make them easier to decipher.

➢ ***The Pop-Up Artist***. This chat fanatic insists on sending a flurry of pinging and popping instant messages throughout the day.

Advice: IMs are fine for *quick* conversations, but don't go overboard. Don't expect that everyone will want to "chat" with you. For many, email is immediate enough.

➢ ***The Conference Call Con***. This multitasker pretends to pay attention during conferences but is so busy checking email that he or she has no clue what's being discussed.

Advice: Although everyone multitasks from time to time, pay attention to relevant conversations when necessary. Turn off your handheld device for a while if it will help.

For more information, see Robert Half's new guide, *Business Etiquette: The New Rules in a Digital Age* (www.roberthalf.us/businessetiquette). ■

Source: Robert Half International, a large specialized staffing firm (www.roberthalf.us/home).

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prove helpful when attending any networking opportunity or event:

✓ Check your business card supply and make sure your cards are with you even at social or charity events.

✓ Smiling is contagious so start an epidemic and infect the whole room with yours.

✓ Shake hands with people you know and introduce them to others. You are the consummate professional.

✓ Plan ahead of any event and get an idea of who will be there and who you specifically want to meet.

✓ Look into the person's eyes when you shake hands and verbally state his or her name. People love to hear their own name. It also helps you remember it!

✓ Avoid two persons talking together. It is a private conversation and should not be interrupted.

✓ Recognize your peers. You'll be appreciated as a team player, but don't spend much time talking with them. Cultivate relationships with those you *don't* know.

✓ Never write anything on the back of a business card in front of the presenter. Walk away and make your note privately.

✓ Be selective. Don't give your business cards to everyone as if they were flyers at a hardware store opening. It appears pushy and unprofessional.

✓ Finally – follow-up. Don't send emails or make phone calls to everyone you meet. Be specific. Don't waste your time or theirs. ■

Barbara Bergstrom is an award-winning trainer, public speaker, and author. For more information, visit www.BarbaraBergstrom.com.