Psychological Health & Safety in the Workplace

By Mark Attridge, PhD

This column addresses the integration of EAPs with other workplace services. This time I examine the increasing interest of leading employers for including EAP as part of the overarching corporate goal of creating a psychologically healthy and safe workplace. This trend represents tremendous opportunities for EA professionals to better integrate EAPs into various workplace health initiatives.

Psychological Health and Safety

A greater focus on what leaders and managers can do to promote workplace mental health is a welcome trend. It demonstrates a more collaborative and realistic mindset compared to the more traditional focus on sponsoring employee benefit services to assist troubled employees and yet at the same time largely ignoring the causal role of organizational-level influences on the psychological health of employees. EAPs historically have been most effective when given the chance to advise and support leadership and managers in addition to their everyday role with assisting individual employees in need.

HERO 2019 Winter Think Tank & CMO Summit

The Health Enhancement Research Organization (HERO) is a nonprofit organization based in Minnesota dedicated to identifying and sharing evidence-based best practices in workplace health and well-being. HERO has over 100 members who represent a mix of employers, wellness providers, and nonprofits. I profiled their Scorecard and its potential for enhancing EAP consulting in my last column (See https://archive. hshsl.umaryland.edu/handle/10713/7397).

For the first time in its 20-year history, a HERO members-only conference – called a "Think Tank" – focused solely on the topic of workplace mental health. *Psychological Safety at Work* was the theme of the February 2019 conference held in San Antonio. Building on key concepts from Harvard University Business School Professor **Amy Edmonson, PhD's**

2018 book – *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth* – the meeting featured a dozen presentations and several small group discussion activities. Download the conference proceedings at: https://hero-health.org/wp-content/ uploads/2018/10/HERO_Winter-TT-2019-v3.pdf

The two-day conference was filled with inspiring and evidence-based presentations that emphasized the critical role of psychological health and safety to organizational success. It was special to me to see business executives and corporate medical directors recognizing workplace mental health as a leading issue. *Highlights most relevant to EAP from several of the presentations appear below.*

➢ Research on EAP Effectiveness and Trends

I was one of the presenters at this Think Tank meeting and also helped to summarize the talks for the HERO Proceedings document. My presentation chronicled the substantial research evidence on outcomes of brief counseling in the workplace to answer the basic question: *"Do EAPs Work?"*

I also stressed that the key to having an effective EAP often involves *greater integration* of the EAP within the workplace and organization and connecting it to larger business goals, *which ties in well with the goal of creating psychologically healthy workplaces*. Data from large-sample global research studies was provided as examples for these main points. The slides are available here: [https://archive.hshsl.umaryland.edu/handle/10713/8869].

➢ Guarding Minds at Work
[www.guardingmindsatwork.ca]

Merv Gilbert, PhD (Director of Vancouver Psychological Safety Consulting and Faculty member at Simon Fraser University) discussed how Canada is at the global forefront in taking action to improve psychological safety in the workplace (See my 2018 review article in the *JEA*: https://archive.hshsl.umaryland.edu/handle/

10713/7204). A key example is the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace, which is being adopted by the International Standards Organization (ISO) as a template for psychological health and safety in the workplace.

Gilbert and colleagues created *Guarding Minds at Work,* which is a no-cost organizational assessment tool and set of self-directed employer action resources. The tool involves collecting a sample of employee ratings of 13 factors of workplace mental health that are then scored, compared to Canadian benchmark data, and summarized. It also includes suggested response documents, action planning worksheets, post-action evaluation worksheets, and links to organizations active in promoting workplace mental health.

➢ **Center for Organizational Excellence [**http://www. apaexcellence.org/resources/creatingahealthyworkplace/]

David Ballard, PsyD (American Psychological Association) noted that addressing these issues requires a broad, multi-level approach, which includes organizational factors and not just individual interventions. He reviewed the APA's research-based conceptual model of a psychologically healthy workplace and how multiple factors (health and safety, work-life balance, employee involvement, employee recognition, employee growth and development) are enacted through organization-wide communication practices.

The Center's website offers many resources available and is now part of a new emphasis at the APA on applied psychology. It also presents annual Psychological Healthy Workplace awards – many that emphasize the important role of EAPs. See a short video on 2018 award winners here: http://www.apaexcellence.org/awards/

➢ **Center for Workplace Mental Health** [http://workplacementalhealth.org]

Darcy Gruttadaro, JD (Director of the Center, American Psychiatric Association Foundation) described the mission and resources of her non-profit, which since 2005 has provided free resources, services, and consultation to more than 10,000 employers. For example, two of the more popular mental health awareness and anti-stigma programs for employers are the "Right Direction" program on depression and the "ICU" program (Identify – Connect – Understand) developed by DuPont.

She also described employer case examples that demonstrated how worksite social awareness communication campaigns increased use of the EAP. Successful efforts at international corporations **Sprint**, **Ernst & Young**, and **Kent State University** were featured.

➢ **WorkPartners – UPMC** [http://www.workpartners.com]

In closing, I had an illuminating lunch at the conference with **James Kinville, MA** (Senior Director of EAP, **University of Pittsburgh Medical Center**. This is both an internal EAP for the 55,000 faculty and staff, and a vendor that serves another 45,000 lives in the local community through direct employer customers and being part of a health plan. *They have enacted many of the strategies I have been writing about in this column for integrating the EAP into different parts of the organization.*

For example, the absence management specialty program uses the EAP to conduct assessments for all employees who request a leave from work for the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) benefit. The EAP is also involved with employees who have a workers' compensation disability claim. *Both these efforts have results in documented business cost savings for these allied programs.*

In 2017, they acquired the HCMS Group, which has sophisticated data warehouse analytic tools that can identify individuals at greatest risk for high utilization and/or low productivity and be used to then provide targeted clinical interventions. *This approach allows the EAP to get involved with at-risk cases much earlier than the usual approach of waiting for troubled employees to call the EAP for help.*

Summary

The HERO meetings demonstrated the larger trend of increasing interest among leading employers in promoting workplace mental health. The many resources noted in this column also illustrate a growing number of tools and resources (most at no cost) that EA professionals can utilize to promote use of the EAP as part of their customer's overarching business goals and initiatives concerning workplace culture and psychological health and safety. ❖

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