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Codependency in the Workplace: Implications for EA Professionals



Most conversations surrounding codependency predominantly focus on romantic partnerships or family systems. However, this dysfunctional behavioral pattern is frequently present and often overlooked in workplace dynamics. When it surfaces in professional environments, it can erode productivity, distort professional relationships, and significantly impact organizational health. For EA professionals, a nuanced awareness of codependent behaviors in the workplace is essential for effective intervention and support. This article examines the manifestations of codependency in organizational settings, explores its developmental underpinnings, and highlights promising approaches grounded in cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and evidence-informed practice principles to strengthen best practices within EAPs.

Defining Codependency in a Professional Context

As originally described in the addiction treatment literature, codependency involves pervasive patterns in which individuals prioritize others' needs and emotional states at the expense of their own well-being (Beattie, 1987; Schaefer, 1986). Common characteristics of codependent behavior include excessive people-pleasing, blurred boundaries, an overwhelming need for external validation, and a pronounced drive to manage, control, or rescue others. While these behaviors might initially appear altruistic or loyal in a professional context, they are often deeply motivated by underlying fear of rejection, a need for approval, or a belief that one's worth is tied to being indispensable to others. Left unchecked, these maladaptive traits can undermine autonomy, strain professional relationships, and reduce effectiveness. For EA professionals, a thorough understanding of these nuances is critical when seeking to identify and address the often-hidden aspects of this behavior with employee clients, supervisors and managers.

At its core, codependency in the workplace reflects a self-perception that is overly dependent on external validation, particularly from colleagues or supervisors. This can manifest as an excessive need to be perceived as helpful, an inability to say no to additional tasks or requests, even when overloaded, or an excessive need to be perceived as helpful, regardless of personal cost and becoming enmeshed with a caretaker role. Unlike healthy, cooperative collaboration, which maintains clear boundaries, codependency distorts autonomy, and may often lead to one individual taking on significantly more responsibility, decision-making abilities, control, and/or emotional and physical labor for another. EA professionals can provide psychoeducation and individual counseling to help employees differentiate between genuine collaboration and unhealthy enmeshment. The insidious nature of codependent behavior may manifest in various forms, impacting both supervisory relationships and peer interactions within an organization. Recognizing these distinct manifestations is crucial for targeted EA interventions.

Supervisor–Employee Dynamics

In supervisor–employee dynamics, a supervisor exhibiting codependent traits may overfunction by consistently shielding an employee from legitimate accountability, taking on tasks that inherently belong to the employee, or providing disproportionate emotional support that extends well beyond the appropriate professional role. For instance, a supervisor might consistently rewrite an employee's poorly drafted reports rather than coaching them to improve, or they might intervene in conflicts between employees to fix the situation instead of facilitating appropriate resolution skills among the team. Although perhaps well-meaning, such inappropriate overfunctioning can inadvertently stunt an employee's professional growth, foster a sense of learned helplessness, and prevent them from developing essential problem-solving abilities.

In turn, employees caught in such a dynamic may engage in overwork or constantly seek reassurance and validation from their supervisor to gain approval. An employee might stay late habitually, volunteer for every extra project, or seek constant praise for minor accomplishments, not out of genuine dedication, but out of a desperate need to be seen as indispensable. This intertwines their self-worth with their supervisor's perception rather than grounding it in their own competencies, ultimately diminishing their intrinsic motivation and confidence. Such a dynamic can lead to a cycle where the supervisor feels overwhelmed by the constant need to manage the employee's emotional state, and the employee feels perpetually insecure and undervalued despite their efforts. EA professionals can intervene by offering consultation to supervisors on effective delegation and boundary setting, and by guiding employees toward internal validation and self-efficacy.

Peer Interactions

Among peers, codependency often surfaces when one employee repeatedly compensates for another's underperformance, willingly accepting extra work or responsibilities to maintain superficial harmony or avoid conflict. This might look like an employee consistently covering for a colleague who frequently misses deadlines, or always being the one to de-escalate tensions by sacrificing their own needs or opinions. These patterns foster environments where boundaries are poorly defined or consistently violated, leading to a slow but steady accumulation of resentment and burnout over time for the over-functioning individual. The helper may feel unappreciated and overwhelmed, while the colleague being helped may never develop personal accountability, perpetuating the cycle.

Organizational cultures that unintentionally reinforce these dynamics, perhaps by celebrating those who consistently (and sometimes inappropriately) take on other’s responsibilities or workload without addressing its underlying cause risk enabling chronic underperformance, fostering imbalanced workload distribution, and ultimately diminishing overall team morale. This behavior can create a workplace where direct communications are avoided, problems fester, and true collaboration becomes replaced by dysfunctional reliance. EA professionals, in their consultative roles, are uniquely positioned to help teams identify when well-intentioned over-helping crosses the critical line into detrimental enabling. Addressing this dynamic typically requires careful observation and sensitive, targeted interventions, possibly through supervisory/management coaching and/or team development workshops focused on clear role expectations and suitable shared responsibilities.

Developmental Underpinnings and Workplace Implications

The roots of codependency frequently trace back to early life environments where an individual’s sense of worth was made contingent upon compliance, caretaking behaviors, or meeting others’ emotional needs. For example, a child who consistently had to “be strong” for an emotionally fragile parent might internalize the belief that their value comes from taking care of others. Adults who learned and internalized these patterns in formative years may subsequently struggle significantly with asserting themselves, feel excessively responsible for others’ emotions, or actively avoid conflict at all costs in an effort to preserve relationships, even when those relationships are detrimental to their own well-being. This learned pattern of prioritizing others’ needs over one’s own can become deeply ingrained. In professional settings, these deep-seated developmental patterns can manifest in highly specific and challenging ways that impact daily working life:

- Difficulty declining additional tasks: Even when an individual’s capacity is clearly exceeded, they may struggle to say no, fearing negative repercussions such as disappointing colleagues or being perceived as uncooperative. This can lead to chronic overextension and eventual burnout.



- Heightened anxiety over disappointing supervisors or colleagues: This anxiety can manifest as perfectionism, excessive checking of work, or an inability to delegate, driven by an intense fear of criticism or not meeting perceived expectations.
- Assuming responsibility for factors beyond one’s role or control: This often results in chronic stress and an overburdened workload, as the individual attempts to manage outcomes that are not their purview, believing they must control every variable to ensure success.
- Suppressing personal needs: To maintain perceived harmony or avoid conflict, individuals may consistently sacrifice their own needs, energy, and well-being, leading to exhaustion, resentment, and a diminished sense of personal agency.
- Internalizing feedback as a personal failing: Rather than viewing constructive criticism as a growth opportunity, it can be perceived as a direct attack on their intrinsic worth or competence, leading to defensiveness, self-blame, or withdrawal.

For EA professionals, understanding these developmental underpinnings is crucial for providing empathetic yet effective support, helping employees to recognize the origins of their behavioral patterns and to develop healthier coping mechanisms within the workplace. This level of understanding allows for interventions that address not just the behavior, but the underlying cognitive and emotional drivers.

A CBT Framework for Intervention

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is an evidence-based practice which aims to maximize the effectiveness of psychological interventions and provides a highly practical lens for helping employees recognize, challenge, and ultimately adjust codependent patterns. CBT fundamentally emphasizes the intricate link between an individual’s thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Linehan, 1993) through focusing on achieving behavioral change through changing incorrect and unhelpful thinking using the relationship between thinking and behavior (Beck, 2019; Beck & Fleming, 2021). EA professionals can adeptly guide clients in identifying core beliefs that fuel codependency, such as, “I am only valuable when I am needed” or “My worth is tied to how much I sacrifice for others.” Subsequently, they can explore how these core beliefs trigger automatic thoughts, for instance, “If I say no, I will be rejected,” or “If I don’t fix this, it will all fall apart.” The resultant codependent behaviors, such as habitual over-functioning, people-pleasing, or rescuing others, often stem directly from these ingrained thought patterns.

Through structured CBT interventions, for example: thought records, cognitive restructuring, and behavioral experiments, employees can gain practical experience in modifying these patterns. A thought record helps an employee meticulously document a situation, their automatic thoughts, associated emotions, and subsequent behaviors, allowing them to identify cognitive distortions. Cognitive restructuring involves challenging these distorted thoughts and replacing them with more balanced and realistic alternatives. For instance, an employee might challenge the thought “If I say no, I will be rejected” by considering past instances where setting a boundary did not lead to rejection, or by acknowledging that healthy relationships tolerate boundaries.

Behavioral experiments are particularly powerful in breaking codependent cycles. For example, an employee might be encouraged to intentionally decline a nonessential request from a colleague and then carefully observe the actual outcomes. This direct experience often challenges the deeply held assumption that setting boundaries inevitably leads to rejection or negative consequences, thus reframing their cognitive distortions. They might discover that their relationships remain intact, or even improve, as colleagues respect their limits. These strategies are not merely theoretical; they are practical, actionable tools that EA professionals can seamlessly integrate into short-term counseling and educational sessions, empowering employees with tangible skills for change and fostering greater autonomy. CBT’s structured nature makes it an ideal fit for the brief intervention model often utilized by EA professionals.

Identifying Systemic Indicators

Beyond individual behavioral patterns, EA professionals must remain acutely attuned to broader organizational indicators that suggest the presence of systemic codependency. These indicators can signal a pervasive cultural issue that requires a more comprehensive intervention strategy. Addressing these systemic issues can create a healthier overall work environment, reducing the incidence and impact of individual codependent behaviors.

Key systemic indicators include:

- **Chronic over-functioning by certain staff members:** This often inadvertently enables underperformance or a lack of accountability in others, creating an imbalanced workload and fostering resentment. For example, one team member consistently volunteering for extra shifts to cover for another's frequent absences, without the underlying attendance issue being addressed.
- **Avoidance of direct feedback:** Instead of clear, constructive communication, this manifests as indirect, passive-aggressive communication, gossip, or a general reluctance to address issues head-on, leading to unresolved conflicts and festering grievances.
- **A culture of rescuing rather than fostering accountability:** When problems arise, the immediate inclination is to "fix" them for others (for example, a manager completing an employee's overdue task) rather than empowering individuals to take responsibility for their own tasks and learning from mistakes. This prevents skill development and perpetuates dependency.
- **Vague or ambiguous role expectations:** This often prompts employees to spontaneously assume responsibilities beyond their defined scope, leading to role confusion, duplication of effort, and an uneven distribution of labor, as individuals step into perceived gaps without clear mandates.
- **Unspoken resentment, increased turnover intentions, or reduced employee engagement:** These are often downstream consequences of underlying codependent dynamics that erode morale, trust, and a sense of fairness within teams. Employees who consistently over-function without recognition or boundaries are particularly susceptible to burnout and disengagement.

Recognizing these systemic signs of codependent behavior allows EA professionals to proactively engage in strategic consultations with leadership, recommend targeted training programs on healthy boundaries and communication, and support the development or refinement of organizational policies that clearly define roles and responsibilities. This broader, systemic approach is crucial for creating sustainable cultural change and fostering an environment where healthy interdependence is valued over dysfunctional enmeshment.

Translating Evidence-Informed Principles into EA Practice

Three evidence-informed practice principles consistently emerge as essential to breaking codependent patterns:

- **Accountability** – Clear role ownership and consequence management. Research shows clarity and consistency protect against burnout (García-Arroyo et al., 2021).
- **Relational empathy with boundaries** – Providing genuine support without rescuing or enmeshment. This aligns with Karpman's drama triangle* (Clark, 2020).
- **Consistency** – Predictable policies, communication, and follow-through build trust and reduce role conflict.

These principles mirror CBT's emphasis on balancing empathy with actionable boundaries. Work-focused CBT trials have demonstrated reduced absenteeism and improved outcomes (Grime, 2004; Luangphituck et al., 2023).

**The Drama Triangle, developed by psychiatrist Stephen B. Karpman in 1968, is a social model that maps out the different roles and their destructive interactions that can occur among individuals in conflict.*

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karpman_drama_triangle

Promising Approaches for EA Practice

EAPs can leverage a range of evidence-informed methods to address workplace codependency and promote healthier functioning across individual and organizational levels. These interventions align with the core mission of EAPs to provide accessible, practical, and ethical support that enhances both employee wellbeing and organizational performance.

- Psychoeducation – Providing workshops on boundaries, self-care, and distinguishing between helping and enabling equips employees with the knowledge and language to recognize unhealthy dynamics. Educational approaches normalize discussions around boundaries and resilience, offering preventive tools before problems escalate.
- Brief counseling – Structured, work-focused CBT can reduce stress, absenteeism, and related symptoms (Grime, 2004; Luangphituck et al., 2023). Short-term interventions tailored to boundary-setting and thought restructuring fit seamlessly into the EAP model while delivering measurable benefits.
- Supervisor consultation – Leaders who set clear expectations and maintain consistency are less likely to foster burnout in their teams (García-Arroyo et al., 2021). EA professionals can coach supervisors to delegate effectively, provide constructive feedback, and resist over-functioning on behalf of employees.
- Resource development – Practical tools, such as boundary-setting checklists or job aids, extend the reach of counseling by reinforcing healthy practices in day-to-day tasks.
- Team development – Facilitated sessions on role clarification and conflict resolution allow groups to move beyond rescuing cycles and build collective accountability, enhancing cohesion and reducing dysfunction.



Practical strategies woven into these methods include self-check-ins, assertive communication training, cognitive reframing, and self-care planning. Together, these interventions support employees in shifting from reactive enmeshment toward healthier interdependence, thereby fostering organizational cultures grounded in accountability, clarity, and sustainable resilience (Attridge, 2016; Richmond et al., 2017).

Lessons Learned in EA Practice

Extensive consultations within EAPs consistently highlight several recurring lessons that hold significant implications for both individual employees and organizational health. One of the most prominent findings is the importance of boundary-setting and assertiveness training.

When employees are equipped with the ability to establish and maintain clear personal and professional boundaries, they report measurable reductions in anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms (El Barazi et al., 2024). This is particularly relevant in workplaces where codependent patterns lead to over-functioning, blurred roles, or an excessive need for validation. Equally important is the role of supervisors, whose clarity and consistency in communication and expectation-setting are strongly associated with healthier team functioning and lower levels of burnout.

When leaders avoid over-rescuing behaviors and instead provide steady, predictable guidance, teams are better able to trust processes, distribute work equitably, and remain engaged. Additionally, teams that actively resist rescuing cycles patterns in which members repeatedly over-function to compensate for others demonstrate stronger cohesion and greater accountability. This shift allows individuals to take ownership of their roles without enabling dysfunction. Finally, decades of research confirm that the use of EA services is associated with improvements in both productivity and absenteeism (Attridge, 2016; Richmond et al., 2017), underscoring the value of timely and structured support.

Collectively, these findings affirm that empathy, when paired with clear boundaries and role clarity, strengthens individual well-being while simultaneously promoting resilience and efficiency at the organizational level.

Workplace codependency is not just a matter of isolated individual behaviors but a reflection of systemic organizational dynamics that directly influence team effectiveness, employee well-being, and overall culture. The evidence demonstrates that environments marked by blurred boundaries, inconsistent communication, and rescuing cycles are more likely to foster burnout, absenteeism, and diminished productivity (O'Connor et al., 2018; Demerouti, 2025). Conversely, interventions grounded in evidence-informed practices such as boundary-setting, assertiveness training, and role clarity are consistently associated with improved mental health outcomes and stronger organizational functioning (El Barazi et al., 2024; García-Arroyo et al., 2021).

EA professionals are uniquely positioned to identify these patterns early and intervene with both individuals and systems. By employing strategies rooted in cognitive-behavioral therapy, accountability, relational empathy with boundaries, and consistency, EA practitioners help employees develop healthier coping skills while guiding organizations toward practices that reduce enabling behaviors and build resilience (Grime, 2004; Persson Asplund et al., 2023).

The broader implications for organizations are equally significant. Research confirms that effective EAP interventions improve absenteeism, presenteeism, and overall productivity (Attridge, 2016; Richmond et al., 2017). Teams that avoid rescuing dynamics demonstrate greater cohesion and accountability, while supervisors who lead with clarity and consistency foster cultures of trust and psychological safety (Clark, 2020; García-Arroyo et al., 2021).

Research confirms that effective EAP interventions improve absenteeism, presenteeism, and overall productivity

Collectively, these findings affirm that empathy, when paired with boundaries and evidence-based approaches, strengthens both individual well-being and organizational performance. As EAPs continue to evolve, addressing workplace codependency through structured, research-informed strategies not only an ethical imperative but also a practical necessity for sustaining organizational health and resilience in the long term.

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