THE ROLE OF EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

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BACKGROUND

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) have emerged as a forum through which companies may address the problem of drug abuse detection. Where they exist, EAPs are a natural resource for employers who desire to tackle the problem of drug abuse in the workplace. The programs were originally set up to counsel employees with alcoholism and its related behavioral problems, which makes EAPs a viable option as a tool in the solution of the drug abuse problem.

EAPs can reach employees through a variety of methods, including education, policy development, and management training. Publicity and educational outreach programs in the workplace can provide needed information for employees about drugs, their effects, and sources of help. EAPs can assist corporate personnel in promulgating a clear policy regarding drug abuse among employees. In the job performance model, EAPs work with managers and supervisors to reach drug-abusing employees. Managers are trained to confront employees when appropriate and refer employees to the EAP for professional help. Once the employee arrives at the EAP unit, trained clinicians can identify and diagnose drug-abusing employees and refer them to community resources for appropriate treatment. The initial interview involves use of approprite interview skills (e.g., confrontation techniques) and well-designed drug screening forms. Taking a drug history can be a most helpful tool in locating employees who come to the EAP presenting another problem that may be a screen for an addiction.

EAPs also contribute to corporate short- and long-range planning. The EAP can help define the drug abuse problem for industry by maintaining accurate records for data collection and follow-up evaluation of the population served.

In the author's opinion, EAPs provide a positive alternative to reaching employees with drug problems. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is of critical importance here. It defined an alcohol- or drug-addicted employee as handicapped; this means that even when a drug abuser is identified, counseling needs to be offered before an adverse action is started. In the Federal sector, the EAP has been seen as reasonable accommodation for this law.

Some general concerns and trends need to be addressed to understand the appropriate role of EAPs:

- Alcohol remains the primary drug of abuse in the workplace.
- The problem is one of polydrug abuse (i.e., employees taking a mixture of substances which include legal drugs and alcohol with illegal substances).
- EAPs also have a role with employees who do not have a drug problem themselves, but are living with a family member with a drug problem.
- Family members of employees with drug problems may also seek out the EAP for help in dealing with the troubled employees.

With these points as a background, it is appropriate to look at the future direction of EAPs and how they can relate to drug abuse in the workplace.

INCREASED EMPHASIS ON DRUG ABUSE

There has been a tremendous increase in the use and abuse of drugs not only privately, but in the workplace as well. Companies have tried to control the problem through drug screening in pre-employment physicals, random urinalysis of all employees, and establishment of drug testing related to fitness for duty policies. Employee assistance staff need to be knowledgeable in the areas of security questions, public safety, and legal issues around drug screening. EAPs should not be the enforcers of antidrug policies and procedures but need to work in conjunction with medical departments and security officers for the control of legal and illegal drug abuse in the workplace. In addition, EAPs can be the first referral point for employees with positive drug screens.

EAPs traditionally have been confined to giving information and referring employees to appropriate community resources for further treatment. Many EAPs are now able to also offer short-term counseling (eight sessions or less), as they have added professional staff with treatment capabilities. Consequently, EAPs have less need to refer clients out, serving to reduce health insurance costs to companies. More importantly, by assuring that their EAP staff has appropriate credentialing in addiction, companies can rehabilitate employees within their own structure at much less cost.

EAPs are beginning to serve as controls for usage of mental health benefits. Some companies have begun to request that the employee be seen by the EAP for a second opinion, prior to approval of a lengthy inpatient hospitalization or long-term outpatient therapy sessions. EAPs may end up having ultimate responsibility for planning and monitoring the entire mental health package offered by the company to their employees. This has a significant implication for treatment of addictions, because people often present different problems than those eventually diagnosed as the problem. The more skilled the counselor is in detecting addiction, the sooner employees will be helped and returned to work.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important to realize that the EAP framework can be modified to respond effectively to employee drug abuse. For any abuser, the underlying goal of an EAP is to get rid of the problem and not the employee. Moreover, the emphasis is on rehabilitative and not punitive measures, which serves as a safeguard of employee rights to dignity, privacy, and confidentiality. With help from an EAP, employees with drug dependency problems receive education and treatment instead of mandatory penalties or sanctions imposed by law enforcement officials.

Crowley-Maritime Corporation, a California marine transport firm, implemented a drug inspection program in conjunction with its EAP to respond to escalating drug-related performance deficiencies. With the cooperation of the company EAP and personnel department, the management established an effective policy that delineated drug abuse inspection procedures and education and treatment alternatives for drug abusing employees. Guenther Nuernberger, Crowley-Maritime's EAP manager, states:

"The vast majority of employees welcome the participation of the EAP because they see it as a guarantee that we will adhere to policy. Although not the definitive response to employee drug use, the company EAP is relatively free from being associated with the legal and ethical controversies of drug testing in the workplace."[1]

EAPs are, in the end, a valuable resource for company drug abuse detection efforts. EAPs may play a legitimate role in clarifying procedural grounds, since they can assist in developing and implementing the company drug detection policy. On substantive grounds, EAPs can promote a strong treatment and education approach to drug abuse in the workplace and provide an incentive for employees to redress their dependency.

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1. How One Shipping Company is Keeping Drug Abuse at Bay, *ALMACAN*, June 1985, Vol. 15, No. 6, pp. 18-20.