

Expanding Organizational Influence

The Role of EAPs in Workplace Safety and Health

By Elena Carr and Don Wright



By helping employees identify and resolve personal problems, employee assistance professionals play an important, but often overlooked, role in improving workplace safety and health. Taking steps to increase understanding of this valuable dimension of their work presents an opening through which employee assistance programs (EAPs) can expand their organizational influence.

Although some workplaces and occupations are inherently more dangerous than others, safety hazards exist in virtually every workplace. To minimize risk, employees and management must work together to identify potential problems and be vigilant about following proper safety procedures. In addition, to work safely, employees cannot be impaired by lack of rest or distractions caused by personal concerns such as family problems or drug or alcohol abuse. Thus, the goals of safety and health and those of EAPs can intersect.

Just as in non-workplace situations, workplace safety and health hazards are caused by a variety of factors, some environmental and some behavioral. Environmental hazards are the result of factors beyond employees' control, while behavioral hazards are caused by individuals' actions that may stem from lack of knowledge about proper safety procedures or decisions based on poor judgment. EAP professionals can strengthen their role in improving safety and health by proactively reaching out to their companies' occupational safety and health specialists to ensure that they

understand the role EAPs can play in diffusing those workplace hazards that are more behavioral in nature. In doing so, they can also help facilitate a shift in how EAPs are perceived within organizations, augmenting their traditional position as solely an employee benefit or human resources function and reinforcing their value to employers as well as to employees.

To leverage this opportunity, EAPs must first be familiar with the field of workplace safety and health and its function within their companies. Generally, companies' occupational safety and health specialists are charged with preventing harm to workers, property and the environment, as well as to members of the public who could be impacted by the companies' daily operations. Their specific responsibilities may vary by industry, workplace and types of hazards affecting employees; however, all strive to reduce occupational injuries and illnesses by contin-

ually seeking safer, healthier and more efficient ways of working.

A large part of the job for safety and health specialists is ensuring compliance with regulations set and enforced by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), an agency of the US Department of Labor (DOL). OSHA's role is to assure the health and safety of America's workers. In addition to setting and enforcing standards, OSHA provides training, outreach and education; establishes partnerships; and encourages continual improvement in workplace safety and health. Most working men and women in the nation come under OSHA's jurisdiction.

Although OSHA regulations guide a significant portion of safety and health specialists' daily activities, ultimately they are interested in any strategies that help to improve workplace safety and health. This is where EAPs



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have the opportunity — and responsibility — to step up to the plate.

For example, because drug and alcohol use can significantly impair workers' judgment and coordination, EAPs can help improve workplace safety and health by providing drug-free workplace services. Clearly, a safe and healthy workplace is a drug-free workplace, one in which all employees understand that, in order to work, they must be drug-free, and that for those who are unable to do so on their own because they are drug-dependent, there is help. EAPs that provide drug-free workplace services are critical to helping employees stay safe and healthy because they educate employees about the dangers of drug abuse and provide referral services for employees with substance abuse problems. They also train supervisors on how to recognize the signs and symptoms of impairment and how to intervene appropriately when employee performance deteriorates and safety is jeopardized.

Consider a situation in which a supervisor has concerns about the safety performance of a particular employee. Perhaps the employee has been inattentive to safety guidelines and not demonstrating good judgment — possible signs or symptoms of substance abuse or other personal problems. There are various options for how the supervisor might intervene, and EAPs should be a resource to help supervisors ascertain the best approach. One option might be to make a determination as to whether or not to refer the employee to drug testing based on a reasonable suspicion; another is disciplinary action. But what if the employee's behavior does not rise to the level of reasonable suspicion or disciplinary action? Another strategy could be for the su-

ervisor to refer the employee to the EAP for performance problems that are creating safety and health hazards. The EAP may be able to work with the employee to identify and address the underlying issues causing their carelessness.

Additionally, it is not uncommon for employees to seek assistance from EAPs on their own to deal with on-



the-job stressors such as conflicts with fellow employees or supervisors. In doing so, they may sometimes divulge perceived failures to follow safety procedures or fears for their personal safety in the workplace. As a result, employee assistance professionals may be in a unique position to learn of possible safety problems and bring them to the attention of management; however, they must, of course, only do so when they can ensure that the confidential nature of the disclosure will not be compromised.

Help from DOL.

Drawing upon this example, EAPs looking to sharpen their drug-free

workplace services might benefit from DOL's "Working Partners for an Alcohol- and Drug-Free Workplace" website. Located at www.dol.gov/workingpartners this site is a central source of information about workplace drug and alcohol issues and strategies for addressing them.

For example, EAPs needing to develop a drug-free workplace policy for their company or client can use the site's "Drug-Free Workplace Advisor Program Builder." This tool's "Policy Development" section outlines the key elements of a comprehensive drug-free workplace policy one by one, along the way asking users to select answers to simple, pre-set questions about each element in order to create the most appropriate policy for their particular company.

Questions range from "Who will be covered by your policy?" and "How will your policy be communicated to employees?" to "Will your program include drug testing?" Depending on how these questions are answered, further questions may be asked. For example, if a user indicates that drug testing will be included, he or she is then introduced to and asked to choose among different testing methods and other related issues. Based on the responses provided, the system then generates a policy statement that EAPs can personalize and further modify if desired.

The questions presented by this tool provide an excellent guide for a consultation meeting with management about their expectations for a drug-free workplace policy, allowing EAPs to then develop a comprehensive, tailored policy quickly and easily.

Another "Working Partners" website feature, the "Substance Abuse Information Database" (SAID), is an online repository of hundreds of docu-

ments related to workplace alcohol and drug abuse, including sample policies, surveys, research reports, training and educational materials, and legal and regulatory information. The site also has information about related state laws, community-based organizations that may assist businesses in becoming drug-free and available help lines that can assist individuals who have alcohol or drug problems. Presentations, fact sheets and articles that can be used for supervisor training and employee education purposes also are available.

To learn more about the field of occupational safety and health and the types of hazards, both environmental and behavioral, that can endanger employees, employee assistance professionals should visit OSHA's website (www.osha.gov). The "Small Business" page may be of special interest as it is designed to increase awareness among small business employers about their responsibilities under OSHA regulations. The page also displays additional steps they can take—such as offering drug-free workplace programs that include employee assistance—to protect their employees above and beyond the requirements of the law.

In companies that offer EAP services but do not have a comprehensive safety plan or dedicated safety and health officer, EAPs may be in a position to educate employers about the availability of resources. These resources include OSHA's on-site consultation program, a free service through which occupational safety and health consultants work with employers to identify workplace hazards, provide advice on compliance with OSHA standards and assist in establishing effective safety and health programs.

This program is targeted to small businesses and is completely separate from the OSHA inspection effort; in fact, no citations are issued or penalties proposed. It is also confidential—a participating company's name and any identifying information provided about its

workplace, plus any unsafe or unhealthful working conditions that the consultant uncovers, will not be reported to OSHA enforcement staff. (However, it is important to note that using this service does not guarantee that a workplace will "pass" a regularly scheduled OSHA inspection.)

Other OSHA resources that EAPs might want to inform their companies or clients about include compliance assistance web-based tools, OSHA's toll-free help line (1-800-321-OSHA) and seminars and workshops facilitated around the country by OSHA compliance assistance specialists. OSHA also offers a *Handbook for Small Businesses* and other publications that EAPs may want to download from OSHA's website or order in hard copy (by calling the aforementioned number) to provide as a reference tool to their companies or small business clients.

As EAP professionals know, program advancement is an ongoing challenge, continually requiring new and

creative strategies to ensure that employers and supervisors are aware of EAP services and recognize their critical importance in the organization's success. Accentuating the intersection between EAPs and safe workplaces offers an additional avenue for getting the EAP message out and expanding EAPs' organizational influence. Likewise, for safety and health professionals, EAP services can be another tool in their toolbox of strategies for ensuring that their workplaces are safe, healthy and productive. ■



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