

# **Substance Abuse Prevention & Early Intervention in the Workplace PeerCare: An Effective Union-Management Partnership**

PeerCare is a union-management partnership that uses employee occupational peer groups to stop the acceptance and support of working while under the influence of drugs or alcohol. In exchange for employee efforts, management moves from a punitive approach to supportive and restorative aid for substance abusers. This ongoing program is designed to educate, intervene, and refer workers to appropriate support services to attain healthier, substance-free lifestyles without employer disciplinary action. It is part of a larger corporate behavioral health care program that includes:

- Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- Behavioral Healthcare Organization
- For-cause Drug & Alcohol Testing
- Random Drug & Alcohol Testing

## **Mission**

PeerCare's mission is to reduce substance abuse in the workplace, in part by changing occupational norms that condone this behavior.

## **Objectives**

- 1) To achieve a cultural shift throughout the company from enabling workplace alcohol and drug use, to maintaining a substance free workplace.
- 2) To reduce workplace drinking and drug use.
- 3) To increase workplace prevention and early intervention efforts.
- 4) To shift from company punishment of and co-worker tolerance and concealment of impaired workers to a joint effort to help these workers.
- 5) To increase worker safety.

## **History**

Traditionally, management used the threat of dismissal to induce problem employees to seek treatment for alcohol and drug abuse. This approach often was counter-productive and led to co-worker concealment of violations. In 1987, the company initiated a union-management program known as "PeerCare" to enhance outreach and early intervention to employees with substance abuse problems. In 1990, the Federal government mandated random alcohol and drug testing among interstate transport carriers, an industry-wide ban on alcohol and drug use on duty or coming to duty, and severe penalties for violators.

## **Operations and Activities**

### *PeerCare Teams: The Heart of the Program*

- Teams are composed entirely of volunteers.
- Teams are diverse in gender, ethnicity, and job title.
- Each team member completes a 1-2 day training course to learn how to recognize if a co-worker has a drinking or drug problem, and how to intervene.

### *Mark-Off and Interventions*

- Mark-off occurs when an employee leaves the work site or does not report to work because work performance would be impaired by recent alcohol or drug use.
- PeerCare team members are trained on recognizing an impaired employee and persuade the employee to mark-off.
- When the employee marks-off, it is an excused absence, without pay, and carries no punitive action. This is written into union contracts.
- Following the mark-off, trained peers intervene when the employee returns to work. They explore whether the circumstances of the mark-off suggest the need for help.
- They may recommend that the employee seek help from the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or through the managed behavioral healthcare provider. They also may provide peer counseling and follow-up services.
- More than 20% of the workforce attended off-site PeerCare training, typically for two days. Both management and union employees attended. Everyone left their corporate and union ranks at the door. Attitudes seemed to be critically influenced by informal evening gatherings and discussions.

### *Employee & Community Outreach: Sample Activities*

- Awareness & Education Activities
- Community Service Activities
- Fundraising Activities
- Recruitment Activities
- Community Promotion Activities

### *Annual PeerCare Conference for Unions and Management*

- Major educational and social event of the year.
- Brings together members from across the country to share and celebrate the past year's success.
- Time for reflection and strategic planning
- Features workshops, outside speakers, and entertainment
- Incorporates one of four quarterly planning meetings

### **Strengths of the Program**

- Features union-management joint effort
- Treats all staff as equals
- Strictly maintains confidentiality
- Attracts thousands of volunteer hours

### **Limitations**

- Can encounter uncooperative managers
- Follow through may not be systematic enough to assure that all employees with problems get help
- Needs corporate champions to maintain support

### **Costs and Return on Investment in 1999<sup>1</sup>**

- PeerCare cost \$35 per employee
- Testing programs cost \$35 per employee
- Avoided at least \$1850 in employer cost per employee

### **Replication in Other Companies: What's Needed**

#### *Type of Company*

- Strong unionized workforce.
- Strong bonds among employees.
- Many employees with off-site overnight work assignments
- Tradition of large-scale training
- Culture that fosters or tolerates substance abuse at work

#### *Resources Needed*

- Top Management Support
- Union Support
- Strong Volunteer Support
- Corporate funding

<sup>1</sup>Miller TR, Zaloshnja E, Spicer RS. (2006) *Effectiveness and Benefit-Cost of Peer-Based Workplace Substance Abuse Prevention Coupled with Random Testing. Accident Analysis and Prevention, in press.*

### **For more information or assistance in starting a new program, contact:**

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