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Supervisory referrals to employee assistance programs: Influences on the use of EAPs by supervisors

Abstract

Employee assistance programming is an outgrowth of the occupational alcoholism programs that had their beginnings in the late 1930's and early 1940's. Since that time, changing attitudes and needs of employers and employees have led to a shift of emphasis away from alcoholism and into a larger area including all human problems and difficulties (Googins, 1988b). Along with this shift in focus has come a reallocation of resources within organizations, more specifically, within the unit providing the assistance services. Foote and Erfurt (1981) and Googins (1988a) have shown that supervisory referrals have decreased significantly. Recent public attention to the drug problem has refocused interest on this specific problem in the workplace (White House Conference for a Drug Free America, 1988). Federal legislation has codified the need for employers to address the drug problems in the workplace through a variety of approaches including those strikingly similar to the older occupational alcoholism model (Yandrick and Knight, 1988). The employee supervisor may once again become an integral part of this programming. This paper will review factors influencing supervisory referrals to employee assistance programs and by inference may highlight areas to address in new drug programming.

SUPERVISORY REFERRALS TO EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS:
INFLUENCES ON THE USE OF EAPS BY SUPERVISORS

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Garth E. Barker
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Employee assistance programming is an outgrowth of the occupational alcoholism programs that had their beginnings in the late 1930's and early 1940's. Since that time, changing attitudes and needs of employers and employees have led to a shift of emphasis away from alcoholism and into a larger area including all human problems and difficulties (Googins, 1988b). Along with this shift in focus has come a reallocation of resources within organizations, more specifically, within the unit providing the assistance services. Foote and Erfurt (1981) and Googins (1988a) have shown that supervisory referrals have decreased significantly. Recent public attention to the drug problem has refocused interest on this specific problem in the workplace (White House Conference for a Drug Free America, 1988). Federal legislation has codified the need for employers to address the drug problems in the workplace through a variety of approaches including those strikingly similar to the older occupational alcoholism model (Yandrick and Knight, 1988). The employee supervisor may once again become an integral part of this programming. This paper will review factors influencing supervisory referrals to employee

assistance programs and by inference may highlight areas to address in new drug programming.

Policy

The existence of a company or institutional policy is a significant incentive for supervisors to refer workers to an assistance program. Googins and Kurtz (1980) believe supervisors can only be effective when they know their responsibilities in terms of documenting worker shortcomings such as absenteeism, work quality, and relationships with other employees. Implications of these shortcomings need to be clearly defined in management policy and practice. Policy should further delineate supervisory responsibility in referring those employees not meeting minimum standards. Georgopoulous and Mann (1962) report supervisors who had clear responsibility to use company resources for employee assistance did so. Googins and Kurtz (1981) report increased referrals from supervisors who understood such referrals as part of their responsibilities, and also report decreased referral activity as a result of ambiguity in alcohol policy.

Operation

An area which reflects on the importance the organization places on the assistance program is its location and function within the organizational

structure. Roman (1988) believes assistance programs that remain detached from the management team suffer from a lack of input into planning and coordination of the organization. He believes this detachment alienates line-managers and staff, although he acknowledges the necessity of some separation for purposes of confidentiality and trust. Kurtz, Googins, and Williams (1980) found supervisors dismayed by the lack of communication from assistance staff regarding program information and referred employees. The supervisors report the need for information and advice on dealing with the employee after referral, but found little help. Kurtz, Googins, and Williams (1980) suggest that communication is important to maintaining referrals. Appropriate safeguards in areas of confidentiality are also cited as significant. Further, Roman (1988) believes that interpretation of confidentiality to mean that supervisors are provided no feedback has been a hindrance to supervisory involvement. Supervisors report a desire for more two way information regarding the assistance program and believe a lack of this recognition is a barrier to their use of the assistance program (Googins and Kurtz, 1981). Involvement of the supervisor to a greater

degree in the triangle of employee, supervisor, and the employee assistance program is suggested. Interaction between the assistance program, management, and supervisors is important in building and maintaining a supervisory referral system.

Training

Organizational allocation of resources away from supervisory training in the employee assistance area has had a negative impact on supervisory referrals according to the literature. As emphasis on a broader range of personal problems and self-referral occurs, less time and expense has been placed in supervisory training (Foote and Erfurt, 1981). McClellan (1982) reports a study in which only 42.4% of its sample of employers with assistance programs had conducted supervisory training. McClellan also reports that as most training programs are only from two to six hours in length it is a fallacy to think this will adequately prepare supervisors to effectively address alcohol/drug related work issues.

Several areas of training deficiency have been identified in the literature including knowledge of the problem, policy, and procedures; communication skills; and documentation skills. Salazar and

Doyle (1978) found increasing supervisory knowledge of signs and symptoms of alcohol abuse, particularly on work-related behaviors, resulted in an increase in referrals after training. Valle, as cited by Googins and Kurtz (1980), concluded an increase in specific knowledge about alcoholism was not as important as knowledge about policy and specific steps to use in supervising an alcoholic employee. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (1981) looked at referrals made by supervisors on a railroad and concluded that supervisor insensitivity led to a low referral rate. They recommend that increased training regarding the problem of alcoholism be conducted. Beyer and Trice (1978) indicate supervisors familiar with policy and procedures are more likely to use that policy. Googins and Kurtz (1981) differentiated referring from nonreferring supervisors. They found 10% of the referring supervisors report having received no information regarding the assistance program policy and procedures as compared to 30% of supervisors with no history of making referrals. Further, this study indicated 96% of the referring supervisors report familiarity with the policies regarding alcohol use versus 74% of the nonreferrers.

A second area of training affecting supervisory referrals is the area of communication. Central to supervisory referrals to assistance is the concept of constructive confrontation (Sonnenstuhl, 1982). As defined by Sonnenstuhl, constructive confrontation requires that supervisors confront the employee with deteriorating job performance, while coaching them on their work and encouraging them to use the company's assistance program. Myers (1984) believes managers generally underestimate the importance of communication in confrontation interviews and as a result supervisors have been frequently both ill-trained and poorly prepared to handle the confrontation interview. Googins and Kurtz (1980) found most supervisors, particularly at lower levels, had little or no formal training in talking to troubled employees. In their survey of supervisors, they found only a third who felt prepared to engage in confrontation, while the remainder expressed anger and frustration over the lack of support in this function. Googins and Kurtz (1981) in comparing referring and nonreferring supervisors show a perception among the nonreferrers that confrontation is difficult. Alpander (1980) found supervisors do not confront employees with problems due

to discomfort with the role. Googins and Kurtz (1984) found employees who were successfully referred for assistance in an alcoholism program believe their supervisors were poorly trained in the confrontation process. These employees found the supervisors' confrontations reactive to a major crisis and not in response to deterioration of work performance.

A final area of concern in training is documentation skills. Documentation is one of the integral components of supervision and as McClellan (1982) indicates, is an area with weaknesses. He feels the movement away from measureable, objective performance criteria in job descriptions toward the more abstract criteria of knowledge, organizational skills, and mental activity has made documentation of work performance more difficult. Shain and Groeneveld (1980) found social behavior at work, rather than performance criteria, as a more common indicator of a problem employee to a supervisor. However; Kurtz, Googins, and Williams (1980) found attendance to be the only documentation employed regularly by supervisors. They found supervisors believe that behaviors not specifically related to job performance were exempt from action. When documentation did occur, the goal was generally

self-protection rather than to improve job behaviors or to intervene. The authors found a collective awareness among coworkers and the supervisor that deteriorating performance and behaviors not documented resulted in the supervisors difficulty to confront the problem employee. The authors drew the conclusion that supervisors should be assisted in finding methods of documenting nonperformance criteria such as social behavior at work for use in interventions. Employees believe that regular documentation of performance and behaviors did not occur and therefore confrontation does not occur early in the problem state, but only later after a major problem develops (Googins and Kurtz, 1984).

As reported in this paper, a review of the literature suggests several areas of training for supervisors in relation to employee assistance programs. Knowledge of policy and procedures, as well as specific knowledge of problem areas, have influenced supervisory referrals. Supervisors and employees further report that communication and confrontation techniques are areas of needed training. Finally, suggestions have been made to aid supervisors in developing innovative

documentation methods for job related behaviors to give the supervisor information for use in an intervention.

Labor

Labor's attitude toward the assistance program is another factor affecting supervisors. Beyer, Trice, and Hunt (1980) have demonstrated that a union's view of a company's alcoholism and referral policies has had an effect on supervisory involvement. When the union is supportive of or neutral toward a policy, participation by supervisors is increased. Googins and Kurtz (1980) report supervisors may attempt to conceal or ignore poor or deteriorating job performance rather than risk a problem with labor organizations. A survey (Kurtz et al., 1980) of supervisors found the fear that union charges of harassment would result from supervisors' interventions regarding alcohol use by employees was a barrier to referrals.

Another area of labor relations having an effect on referrals is in the area of discrimination. Cahill, Volicer, and Smith (1981) report finding supervisors were particularly reluctant to confront female employees for fear that charges of discrimination would occur.

Suggestions have been made (Beyer et al., 1980) to

solicit a favorable position from labor on the assistance program even if it is not a cooperative program,

Experience

The length of time in a supervisory position has been shown as a discriminating feature between supervisors who refer and those who do not (Googins and Kurtz, 1981). Supervisors with experience report they learned little was gained by putting off problem employees and were more willing to refer, which suggests that new supervisors be educated to understand their limitations in dealing with problem employees (Kurtz et al., 1980).

When supervisors have an opportunity to be involved in informal networking systems, the likelihood of referral increases (Googins and Kurtz, 1979). The authors suggest that newer supervisors or isolated supervisors underutilizing assistance programs be included in such a network system.

Beliefs and Emotions

Belief systems and emotions affect supervisors' tendency to refer workers to assistance programs. Many supervisors employ rationalizations to avoid making referrals (Myers, 1984). They may believe they will be playing God with such a referral, interfering in a

personal matter inappropriately, or will be making unqualified diagnoses according to Myers. Supervisors have reported to other investigators (Kurtz et al., 1980) that they fear harming the employee's family by taking action and do not wish to have this responsibility. Further, Googins and Kurtz (1981) suggest that some supervisors hesitate to refer employees for assistance because they believe a referral reflects on their competency as a supervisor.

Cooper (1988) describes a series of emotions supervisors experience during the referral process which are similar to a grief process and which result in supervisory referral very late in the problem stage. His suggestions for addressing these emotional and belief obstacles include explanation, education, confrontation of rationalizations, and supportive activities.

Summary

Interest in the problem of drug use and its effect on the workplace has presented the opportunity for organizations to use their supervisory staff to help address this issue. Several areas were identified which have had an effect on supervisory use of similar programs for alcoholism in the past. The literature indicates

that policy should reflect the importance of and place emphasis on this area in a clear, unambiguous manner. Policy should spell out both the responsibilities and limitations of the supervisor in the referral process. Procedures for use of the policy should be made available and communicated effectively to the supervisors. The employee assistance staff should be visible and active within the organization and should interact with supervisory staff in the referral process. Prioritizing resources toward additional training of supervisors would benefit organizations in the employee assistance area. Finally, attempts should be made to attend to individual supervisor's needs through the use of informal support systems, recognition, and individual contact with assistance staff.

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