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Conflict Management and the Core Technology

A troubled employee often is symptomatic of issues affecting several workers or even entire work groups. Offering conflict management services can enable EAPs to address such issues on a broader scale.

by Patricia M. Porter, LCSW and Cecily Sawyer-Harmon, LCSW, CEAP

A work group ... a multiplicity of differences, a catalyst for synergistic change, and our most valuable workplace asset.

A painting ... a piece of history, an element of wholeness, and a thing of beauty.

A magnificent piece of art was stored in a dark, damp basement. It went unprotected and became damaged through years of neglect until it was almost unrecognizable. New owners of the building discovered the painting and saw something worth saving. Expert intervention was required by art conservationists, who meticulously studied the painting and developed a detailed plan to restore and preserve it—one paint chip at a time.

Similar to a conservationist's work in restoring and maintaining valuable pieces of art, EAPs often intervene in destructive and neglected work relationships with the goal of rebuilding and maintaining constructive work environments. Traditionally, EAPs have focused on the problems associated with the job performance, personal challenges, mental health, and/or substance abuse issues of a "troubled employee." However, just as a painting may be viewed as an amalgamation of paint chips, a troubled employee often is one piece of a larger problem involving several individuals or even an entire work group.

Work relationships are prone to breakdowns, in large part because the workplace naturally encourages change and growth that often lead to conflict. Modern work environments are beset by employee turnover, organizational restructuring, limited resources, and other organizational challenges. These factors can lead to interpersonal stress, communication problems, challenging group dynamics, poor decision-making, performance issues, and (ultimately) increased costs to organizations through lost time and decreased productivity.

EAPs typically take a micro-focused, or employee-centered, approach to resolving such problems. An EA professional will provide counseling and case management services to a troubled worker, the intent being to support the individual in addressing job-related issues on his/her own. But how can EAPs address multi-dimensional problems, especially with limited resources? Should services such as conflict management and mediation be integrated into an EAP's toolbox?

TAKING A "MACRO" APPROACH

Conflict management is a body of knowledge and practices that recognizes, manages, and prevents conflict and/or resolves disputes. It is a fluid and dynamic process that looks for constructive ways to deal with change, confront issues, and address work relationships. Just as EAPs use a variety of strategies to address employee challenges, conflict management practitioners (who often assume an impartial role) use a diverse range of interventions to address conflicts, including mediation among employees, group facilitation, conflict coaching, circle dialogues, and conflict resolution training.

Budget constraints and a lack of resources (such as an ombudsman's office or organizational development specialist) have required our EAP to broaden its core functions and offer conflict management services. Offering conflict management requires us to take a "macro," or systemic, approach when addressing workplace problems, which simply means we look at the big picture or the problem as a whole before developing a plan of action. The plan might include various interventions ranging from individual counseling to conflict resolution with a work group.

In a typical scenario, the director of a work group in discord will call us about protracted conflict among his/her employees. We will respond by conducting a thorough assessment of all the key participants and developing a plan of action in collaboration with management (and with input from employees). Much like an art conservationist designs a plan to meticulously restore a painting one paint chip at a time, a conflict management practitioner diligently works with the individuals and groups, one relationship at a time, with the intent of repair-

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ing and strengthening the group and resolving the issues.

In one particular case, we provided conflict coaching to employees who needed specific attention and support in responding to tensions. Conflict coaching is a one-on-one process that entails helping workers learn to identify their "hot buttons," or triggers, and develop new skills to change their responses. After practicing their new skills, these employees participated in multiple mediation sessions with each other to examine their issues and look for ways to heal and maintain their working relationships. At a later date, we met with the entire work group and jointly designed a facilitated retreat to address the systemic and policy issues that affected everybody. This included a circle dialogue, which provided a structured format so group members could begin healing past hurts.

We have observed that conflict management processes can lead to dramatic transformational changes within a group. These changes sometimes prompt employees to realize that their group culture, workplace environment, or supervisor is not a "good fit." The employees are then empowered to make a decision that best suits their needs.

In one mediation case, a director and assistant director of a center at our university both came to the realization that they had grown apart due to many changes, including the center's new direction. Although their mediation was deemed a "successful process," their resolution was a catalyst for the two to move in different directions—one stayed with the center and the other chose another position within the university. Almost a year later, both employees told us they were grateful for the process. They are both thriving in their new work environments.

WEARING TWO HATS

We propose that conflict management services be incorporated into the EAP Core Technology as the eighth core function. This broadens the EAP's role and gives the program greater flexibility in addressing multi-dimensional conflicts that occur in a changing workplace.

One of the major challenges in offering conflict management services is determining how to balance wearing two professional hats. When the University of Delaware's EAP made the strategic decision to offer conflict management services, we were faced with playing a new role—that of an impartial mediator and facilitator. In this role, it is not our job to judge, discipline, advocate, or counsel employees. It has been our experience that offering conflict management services has helped position our EAP as a neutral entity when dealing with disputes involving management and employees.

Incorporating conflict management services into the EAP Core Technology as a separate function serves to broaden the spectrum in which EAPs can address issues within a work group.

The university's EAP (one of the oldest internal programs in higher education) consists of two full-time practitioners and a part-time practitioner. We also use another trained mediator, a university employee, as needed. We generally mediate in pairs using the transformative model, which promotes self-determination, empowers parties in the decision-making process, and facilitates an open dialogue.

During the initial assessment, it is not unusual for us to determine that an employee has significant personal issues that might interfere with the mediation process. In this case, we will suggest that the employee speak with an EA professional who is not part of the mediation process. We also make referrals to therapists outside the university. The program's flexibility allows us to decide when it is appropriate to serve as an EA professional and when it is appropriate to serve as a conflict management practitioner. We occasionally find ourselves using tools and strategies in mediation sessions that we learned as clinicians, but it requires constant reflection and conscious awareness to not cross the line in providing counseling.

EA professionals and conflict mediators subscribe to different professional disciplines, each with its own set of core values, processes, and skill sets. To provide conflict management services, EA professionals need additional training. Generally, conflict mediators complete a 40-hour course based on nationally recognized standards in the dispute resolution field—the Model Standards of Mediator Practice, which can be found on the Association for Conflict Resolution's Website at www.acrnet.org. Additional continuing education that focuses on process skills, strategies, and techniques in conflict resolution is highly recommended in order to offer a broad spectrum of services, including conflict coaching and group facilitation.

Incorporating conflict management services into the EAP Core Technology as a separate function serves to broaden the spectrum in which EAPs can address issues within a work group. The EAP Core Technology teaches us to respect and value the dignity of each employee and the particular expertise he/she brings to the organization.

We can take an active role in helping employees find the strength to resolve problems confronting them. As short-term therapists, we serve as role models, listen, ask probing questions, obtain detailed histories, and reflect on and ask about clients' feelings. When wearing our mediator hats, we are neutral, non-judgmental, good listeners, consensus builders, and facilitators.

Similar to the art conservationist, an EAP must be meticulous in uncovering and neutralizing a problem before beginning the arduous rebuilding of relationships. Offering conflict management services enables an EAP to restore not just individual employees but also an entire work group. ■