



Investing in Your Workforce with Peer Support Services

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Numerous industries and professions understand the taxing nature of delivering necessary services in demanding environments: Education, health care, emergency response and social services, to name a few.

Yet, responsibilities within these careers are sometimes burdened with such extreme emotional, behavioral and/or physical weight that they can lead to unhealthy amounts of stress and eventual burnout. In worst-case scenarios, employees succumb to secondary traumatic experiences.

It's also believed that the best care and support often comes from inside the trenches. A first responder may be wary of talking with a human resources representative or the promise of confidentiality promoted by a counseling benefit. However, if a peer has had the opportunity to train in methods of support and offers aid in that first responder's time of need, he or she may be more likely to seek help.

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Peer support is an approach to workplace well-being that uses the nonclinical strengths and abilities of motivated staff to assist co-workers in times of struggle or personal crisis. Through guidance from a behavioral health expert and consultant, peer support can strengthen internal resources and sustain the resilience of your organization.

A Deep Dive into Peer Support

To clarify, peer support is neither counseling nor therapy. Rather, it's a way with which organizations can contextualize the need for familiar employee supports in high-stress workplaces.

Peer support services have long been linked as a core competency of effective employee assistance. Engaging employees well-versed in their workplace culture has frequently helped serve as a bridge between co-workers and available resources, such as an employee assistance program (EAP).

Akin to psychological first aid—assisting people in the immediate aftermath of a crisis in order to reduce initial distress and to foster short- and long-term adaptive functioning (see [After the Crisis: Providing Psychological First Aid to the Traumatized](#))—peer support capitalizes on an organization's ability to invest in its human capital, a rich resource unequivocally qualified to understand the challenges faced daily by staff.

From addressing compassion fatigue to coping with vicarious trauma, training employees in peer support practices enables them to provide an empathetic outlet for their fellow professionals, nullifying concerns of “outsiders” who don't necessarily comprehend the day-to-day realities of a specific workplace, industry or field of business.

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Characteristics of a strong peer support team member who grasps the underlying principles of the program include:

Professional Conduct and Behavior. Peer support must respect and communicate the confidential nature of the help being offered, including the limitations of said confidentiality. Successful implementation understands the need to maintain personal boundaries for those seeking assistance.

Compassion. An employee trained in peer support genuinely cares about people; is concerned about work as well as possible personal, non-work concerns like financial challenges or substance abuse; is available and ready to help; and demonstrates an authentic capacity for empathy.

Composure. Providing peer support means keeping cool under pressure. Peer support team members do not become defensive or irritated when times are tough, are considered mature and can be counted on to hold things together during difficult situations. They can also handle stress, displaying a sense of balance when facing the unexpected and remaining calm when resisted or blocked while demonstrating a settling influence during crises.

Approachability. Employees trained in peer support are easily approachable because they invest extra effort into putting others at ease. They can be warm, pleasant and gracious as well as sensitive to and patient with the interpersonal anxieties of others. Active listening, building rapport and promoting trust are all traits of a successful peer support team member.

Listening. A trained peer support team member has the patience to hear people out, can accurately restate the opinion of others—even if he or she disagrees—and is able to identify teaching moments through attentiveness and active listening.

Patience. Broadly speaking, peer support offers tolerance for people and processes while understanding people and data without being judgmental. Employees involved in peer support are sensitive to due process, proper pacing and following employer-established procedures.

Observant. Those trained in peer support are keenly aware of body language and environmental surroundings, taking action to resolve potential threats of either a personal or situational nature.



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Dealing with Ambiguity. Effectively coping with change, comfortably shifting gears and making decisions without having the total picture are crucial to successful peer support implementation. Employees executing peer support services aren't upset when details are up in the air, nor do they have to finish one thing before moving forward with something else. They can comfortably handle both risk and uncertainty.

Organizing. Peer support team members marshal resources—people, funding, material and support—to get things done, orchestrating multiple activities at once to accomplish a goal. They utilize resources effectively, efficiently and in a useful manner.

Perspective. Having a perspective that allows for the broadest possible view of an issue or challenge is the mark of a strong peer support team member. They will often have broad-ranging personal and business interests and pursuits, can easily pose hypothetical scenarios, think globally, and discuss multiple aspects and impacts of issues while predicting future outcomes.

The foundational concepts of peer support are easy to grasp, but not every organization will use peer support the same. The selection process, as well as the ongoing sustainability of the program and well-being of program participants, requires the same strategic approach as any other company-wide implementation process.

An Organizational Investment

Certain critical pillars need establishing when building healthy relationships: Mutual respect, mindfulness, diversity, teamwork and meaningful conversation. How employers engage these pillars and select employees for participation in peer support ranges from organization to organization.

Of course, the needs of the organization vary based on all kinds of criteria—number of employees, size of the business, operational costs, etc.—so peer support services are intended to be flexible in both design and function.

What's the best fit for your organization? Depending on company and culture, your peer support needs can range from the high-touch of monthly consultations, to the low-touch of one-time trainings.



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Short-term support incorporates annual training in psychological first aid and personal resiliency strategies including:

- Educating people on the nature of vicarious and secondary trauma as well as compassion fatigue.
- Recognizing reactions and how to support one another.
- Resiliency development, or a self-care plan.
- Team-building exercises.
- Considering the different forms of traumatic stress faced by your particular organization and workforce.

On the other end is a more intimate, **long-term support** system that, along with the advantages of short-term consultation and training, contributes to an ongoing evaluation of formalized support services such as:

- Policy re-evaluation and development.
- Building safety and psychological first aid into your program through ongoing training and debriefings.
- Developing a peer support operations manual.
- Conducting a multi-day certification program for selected peer support team members.

Whatever your needs, showing an interest in the health and well-being of your workforce is an important step in prioritizing resiliency, productivity and employee retention. Backing from executive staff is important, too, as a top-down system of support reflects an organizational investment in addressing challenging workplace issues.

Engaging Your Employees

Beyond determining the best peer support fit for your organization is the solicitation, engagement and involvement of employees. Employee participation is the lynchpin holding peer support together; without it, the program simply will not work.

So, how do you go about recruiting peer support team members?

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Much like selecting the best level of peer support for your organization—high-touch versus low, long-term versus short, formal versus informal—employee involvement will vary depending on type of workplace, industry or business. Peer support efforts are customized through the lens of organizational culture, facilitating recruitment efforts by acknowledging the diversity of individual employee needs.

Seeking people who best embody the characteristics outlined in the earlier deep dive will aid in the construction of an organizational framework that reflects the ideal peer support team member. These individuals frequently self-identify, or function as someone to whom co-workers already turn when seeking assistance with unofficial conflict resolution and addressing workplace disputes.

Since the use of peer support varies from nuanced, small-scale approaches to organization-wide involvement, questions of formality will require consideration. For example, a police department might implement a formal program that provides one-on-one peer support through specialized training and close collaboration between officers, command staff and an outside expert. On the other hand, back-office staff at a social-serving organization may train only in the basics of well-being support and play a more informal role in any resource referral process.

To illustrate, here's an example of peer support in practice:

A peer support team member is engaged by a co-worker struggling with deadlines and unable to complete daily tasks. The peer support team member learns their co-worker is wrestling with marital concerns and exhibiting signs of depression. In conversation, the peer support team member offers to speak with the co-worker's supervisor about options to alleviate his or her workload, liaise with the organization's EAP and connect the co-worker with a counselor.

This scenario is by no means comprehensive; each situation depends on your own organizational culture and individual workforce. It instead allows you to reflect on what peer support services can help achieve. Peer support team members aren't expected to provide counseling, after all, but are trained in active listening skills and psychological wellness support. Those skills alone can be life-changing for an employee in crisis.

Active listening and psychological wellness support skills can be life-changing for an employee in crisis.

But for peer support team members to successfully serve as the bridge between struggling co-workers and the available help those co-workers need, an organization must first collaborate with an accomplished partner experienced in comprehensive behavioral, emotional and wellness solutions.

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The FEI Difference

With a long history in employee and dependent support services—including psychological first aid and “helping the helper” strategies—FEI excels at developing workforce resiliency by bolstering your organization’s internal strengths and resources. As a stand-alone EAP provider, an intimate understanding of our customers allows us to provide a robust suite of products and services that best suit their needs.

FEI's peer support services offer solutions that will help your employees bring their A-game to the workplace. Whether you're seeking short-term consultation or high-touch program development, our customizable peer support package includes:

An account executive dedicated to providing oversight of, and accounting for, the delivery of FEI's quality services. Account executives consult on programming needs, make recommendations for the promotion of services and understand the human resource and behavioral needs of both the employees and the larger organization.

Resilience trainings in psychological first aid and personal resilience including educating employees on the nature of vicarious and secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, recognizing reactions, learning how best to support one another and team building.

Team support calls that create a forum for providing ongoing psychological support—not therapy—to facilitate staff resilience when dealing with traumatic challenges in unique work environments. Our formats are dynamic and flexible in design, focusing on topics like grief and loss, traumatic stress or self-care best practices. We also facilitate the process through which employees navigate the traumatic nature of workplace activities.

Management consultation and the general availability of FEI team members for questions and consultation from organizational leadership. Our customers have 24/7 access to account executives ready to discuss workplace issues such as employee performance or behavioral problems, toxic or challenging workplace situations, workplace harassment and substance abuse.

At a customer's request, FEI can coordinate **EAP Critical Incident Response** services in response to critical events: Workplace violence, industrial accidents, employee deaths, difficult employees, employee terminations, reductions in the workforce, natural disasters or other traumatic workplace incidents.

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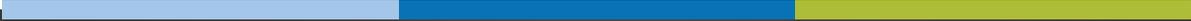
Further, we will work to negotiate the availability of case consultation or provide additional consultation on approaches to pre-incident management, initial defusing of critical incidents and debriefing best practice.

Peer support also guides employees “to the front”—that is, the front of the brain where executive functioning presides. For most of us, “to the front” is where we find our lives to be the most productive, peaceful and rewarding, and peer support provides another opportunity to de-stress and access key aspects of personal resilience.

With this in mind, FEI has developed **Move to the Front**, a brain-based exploration of becoming your best self (see [Move to the Front: A Strategy for Becoming a Stronger Self](#)). Move to the Front's governing principles complement and validate the use of peer support in the workplace. By incorporating cutting-edge neuroscience into the workplace, Move to the Front helps employees navigate the stressors in their lives while developing personal resilience and the resilience of peers.

With over 35 years of EAP experience and consultants highly skilled in the intricacies of organizational culture and social, emotional and behavioral well-being, FEI is pioneering true innovation in the field of peer support service provision.

Partner with FEI, an accomplished expert in employee assistance, crisis management, workplace violence prevention and organizational development, and invest in peer support—the future of workplace resilience.



fe*i* workforce resilience



FEI has a 35-year history in enhancing workforce resiliency by offering a full spectrum of solutions, from EAP and organizational development to workplace violence prevention and crisis management. One of the most successful social enterprises in America, FEI was created by the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, a national network of social sector organizations working to achieve its vision of healthy and equitable society.



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