

Effective Management:

*Using EAP to Facilitate Productivity around
Community Issues in the Workplace*

Jon Buchler, LCSW

Daniel J. Potterton, Chief Operating Officer

FEI Behavioral Health

December 2016

©2016 FEI Behavioral Health All Rights Reserved



fei workforce
resilience

Effective Management: *Using EAP to Facilitate Productivity around Community Issues in the Workplace*

There often is a fine line between obligation and overreach when an organization is challenged by its responsibilities to the community and the biases and preconceptions of its workforce. It is during these times that managers must consider the options that will best serve staff while maintaining operations, resilience, civility and well-being.

In order to illustrate the complexities of both managing a diverse employee population in multicultural communities and the methods with which to adequately address issues of ignorance and apprehension in the workplace, FEI presents a fictional account of interwork dynamics based on relevant trends.

Through the collaboration of management, human resources and the employee assistance program (EAP) provider, solutions for workforce resiliency can be achieved and sustained.

The Situation

A corporation operates an assembly facility in a community where a number of individuals identify as Muslim. Over the past two years, the facility has hired a dozen Muslim employees. Almost two hundred assembly workers are employed by the facility, and they have found their Muslim co-workers reliable and productive.

The Muslim employees generally keep to themselves, and none of their co-workers have made an effort to get to know them. While there haven't been reported incidents of open conflict between the Muslim and non-Muslim employees, there is a large group of workers who are cold and distant toward the Muslims. Some have even expressed antipathy when they thought management staff wasn't around.

A year ago, the Muslim employees approached the assembly facility manager with a request to change their morning break time so they could engage in prayer in accordance with their religious beliefs. Management reviewed the request under the provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and determined it could be granted without disrupting production or changing others' work schedules. However, a number of employees would have to shift positions on the assembly line to accommodate the break changes. Management okayed the request and noted that they would enact it only after other workers were trained to complete tasks at the affected work stations.

Since the company couldn't allow travel off-site to pray at the local mosque because the commute would extend the break beyond a reasonable period of time, the Muslim workers were allowed to gather instead in a vacant room at the facility once their request was implemented.

The Challenge

The facility manager announced the break changes well in advance. Workers were asked to volunteer for the needed station transitions and offered an extra day of paid time off in return for their flexibility. Nevertheless, a number of workers approached the facility manager to protest what they considered special treatment of the Muslim employees. Some supervisors advised the facility manager that a few employees were angry and speaking out about being "forced" to work with their Muslim peers.

As lethal attacks by self-identified Muslims with reported ties to Islamic terrorist groups were covered in the media, tensions in the workplace mounted. Several employees began making disrespectful comments about

Effective Management: *Using EAP to Facilitate Productivity around Community Issues in the Workplace*

their Muslim co-workers and were outspoken in their belief that the company had no right hiring them. While no overt conflict had occurred, it became clear the organizational climate at the facility was straining.

The facility manager reported his concerns to upper management. The CEO of the company quickly called a meeting of top management staff, including the vice president of human resources and the facility manager, to develop an action plan for de-escalating the situation and preventing future problems of a similar nature.

The Action Plan

At the recommendation of the vice president of human resources, management agreed that further action steps should be developed after inclusion and consultation of their EAP provider. Working in tandem with the EAP, the management group decided a letter should be written by the CEO to the facility employees as a way of responding rapidly and making the company's concerns and positions known to all staff. They also decided the CEO would travel to the facility for a meeting with all employees.

Based on conversations concerning best approach with the EAP, the CEO circulated a letter which detailed:

- The company's commitment to a workplace in which all employees interact with their colleagues in a professional and respectful manner.
- The need for support from all employees to promote a safe and respectful work environment for everyone.
- Acknowledgment of the right to free speech, but noting that free speech didn't include inflammatory statements promoting or leading to violence, or speech that was harassing in nature.
- An embrace of the employer's responsibilities to all employees, adding that a series of action steps would follow promoting mutual respect and safety.
- The company's expectation that all employees would conduct themselves accordingly, and that insulting statements or those encouraging anything that could compromise the safety of other employees would result in disciplinary actions.
- That every employee could come to work knowing they were valued and that their contributions to the company were appreciated by both management and their colleagues.

Soon after distributing the letter, an all-staff meeting was held at the facility. The CEO acknowledged the challenges of working harmoniously in a diverse workplace, but was very clear about the expectation that all employees work together to create a culture of respect and mutual support. The vice president of human resources shared the company's relevant policies and procedures for addressing safety and harassment issues. Both the facility manager and HR staff reminded everyone of their open door policy and the existence of the EAP benefit, encouraging employees to openly voice concerns.

Further action steps were identified with the help of the EAP provider. Per the EAP's recommendation, the company would create standing workgroups consisting of eight employees, an HR staff member and the facility manager. These groups would meet regularly to promote positive employee engagement and interaction, serving as a forum for workers to discuss ways for improving the workplace environment and working conditions. Two Muslim employees would be included in the workgroup.

Effective Management: *Using EAP to Facilitate Productivity around Community Issues in the Workplace*

The EAP provider also encouraged the on-site presence of an EAP counselor who would support the goals of improved safety, employee engagement and increased morale. Staff were informed that this counselor would be on-site two days a week and available to meet with any employee.

In order to more specifically address the issues at the facility, a training was completed for all employees which reviewed company expectations on employee-to-employee relationships and its policies and procedures concerning harassment and safety in the workplace. Emphasis was placed on the value of positive, respectful relationships between employees and recognition of differences.

The Solution

In the weeks following, the EAP counselor and the facility manager circulated throughout the facility and engaged workers in an informal manner. Much of the interaction was relaxed and did not focus on apprehensions towards Muslim workers, but conversation would sometimes turn to that topic. The goal of this activity was to defuse tension and provide outlets for employees to express legitimate concerns.

The Muslim employees were invited to engage their fellow workers in the hopes that interaction would help break down barriers and help workers view each other as individuals rather than as members of a stereotyped group. While the Muslim workers were open to the idea, they ultimately were reluctant. The EAP counselor and the facility manager respected their positions, but did not give up on the goal of promoting more interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim employees.

The company's rapid response and strong follow-up activities were successful in averting an escalation of conflict at our example facility and deterred the need to take disciplinary action against workers. There were still those employees who were unhappy working alongside their Muslim co-workers and times when tensions manifested themselves in cool dispositions toward them.

Over time, the workgroups proved to be an excellent tool to surface employee concerns and demonstrate the company's serious interest in their well-being as workers. Overall, morale improved as the company accommodated a number of changes requested by the workgroups.

Collaborating with EAP to Maintain Resiliency

The presence of the EAP counselor proved invaluable when encouraging employees to feel more connected to the company and engage with co-workers. As the counselor got to know them and took interest in their lives, a perceptible improvement in morale occurred. Relationships became less formal and more relaxed and interactive. Most importantly, the activities of the EAP, together with the facility manager and the HR staff, brought about a significant reduction in tension in the workforce.

Throughout the course of deliberations, the EAP counselor pointed out that the problem was truly a community-wide issue manifesting itself in the workplace. It was noted that prejudices were simply a fact of life in human relationships and that the company would be over-reaching if it attempted to change the mindset of employees via workplace activities.

The EAP counselor was able to informally work with employees and help them see each co-worker as a unique human being instead of a member of a racial or religious group, laying the groundwork for improved relationships.

Effective Management: *Using EAP to Facilitate Productivity around Community Issues in the Workplace*

The counselor could learn more about which employees were having the greatest difficulty with the presence of Muslim employees in the facility and work with them, noting that they were grappling with basic fears for their safety and that they needed assistance understanding not all Muslims posed a threat to their way of life.

This fictional illustration establishes the need to be proactive when dealing with issues of morale, engagement and workplace relationships. A program of regular, active engagement can be very helpful when conflicts arise and even serve to reduce tension in the workplace.

At times when employees' cherished beliefs—and even prejudices—manifest themselves in the workplace, it's important for companies to recognize the limits of their role. They have an obligation to maintain a safe workplace free of harassment, but they do not have an appropriate role in changing attitudes. Workplace behavior is one thing; beliefs are another. An EAP provider will offer the resources and guidance necessary to understand workplace dynamics while reacting accordingly and within the limits of employer responsibility.

The FEI Difference

Tackling challenges of interpersonal conflict can be daunting even in the best workplaces, but the inclusion of outside perceptions, stereotypes and biases—be they unconscious or not—can test the limits of any organization's well-being.

An employer doesn't have to go it alone. There are programs and services available to assist even the most overwhelmed employer with the cultural dynamics present in an increasingly diversified workforce.

FEI offers a wide range of EAP services for organizations, including management resources. Managers benefit from immediately accessible consultation for workplace issues such as threats and/or violence, harassment and diversity concerns. We train managers and supervisors to address performance or behavioral issues—often the result of personal struggles external to work—and better equip them to provide appropriate direction and support for distressed employees.

Through EAP, FEI provides consultation related to a variety of challenges that can include:

- Employee personal problems that interfere with work performance, attitude or attendance.
- Concern for employee suicide, violence or other workplace behavioral risks.
- Organizational change and transitions, such as layoffs and mergers.
- Training needs, including diversity training.
- Policy development and application.
- Promoting the availability of EAP services.

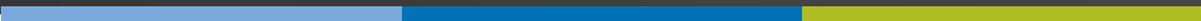
Our services redirect employee personal problems and sensitive workplace issues to the EAP, which frees managers to do what they do best: manage. FEI's consistent approach in addressing workplace challenges and policy application will bolster resiliency and help ensure the well-being of your entire employee population.



fe*i* workforce resilience



FEI partners with you to protect and enhance your workforce effectiveness and organizational resiliency. We offer flexible solutions for the full spectrum of your workforce resilience goals, from EAP and wellness to crisis preparedness and management. We leverage our proven resources, compassionate experts and robust network to improve your employees' focus, empower your managers and prepare you to handle the unthinkable crisis, so that you can maintain a healthy, resilient organization.



phone: 800.987.4368
fax: 414.359.1074

Milwaukee, Wisconsin
New York, New York
Atlanta, Georgia

website: www.feinet.com
email: info@feinet.com

