

LENDING A HAND AND A PERSONAL TOUCH TO EMPLOYEES

By Dan Potterton

Employee assistance programs—referred to as EAPs—can be a valuable support system for associations and their employees. EAPs can advise association employees about child care and elder care services and connect them to resources for substance abuse issues or grief counseling. A good EAP will also help people get back on their feet and refocused on their job. Whether an association consists of a handful of employees or hundreds, there's an EAP that can help your group foster a better work environment.

Finding the Right EAP. When seeking the best EAP, keep in mind three things: geography, outcomes and overall expertise. There are several national EAPs well positioned to serve large associations with chapters in a variety of states. However, an EAP with deep-rooted local connections might be a wiser choice for smaller, state or regional associations.

The EAP should also be able to share details about past utilization rates, the success of its services, and its overall impact on the people it's worked with. Ask questions about the breadth of an EAP's expertise. Does it have the capacity to handle the anticipated usage volume? Does it have great connections for substance abuse support but minimal resources for domestic issues? Is it focused only on physical well-being or does it take into account mental resiliency, too? Be aware of these factors during the decision-making process.

Purchasing Options. After choosing an EAP, there are a couple different purchasing options. The association can purchase an EAP directly for its employees, or the association can consider offering a coordinated EAP to their member organizations. In the second scenario, association members benefit from a group price but still enjoy individualized services. Additionally, as a member of the association's umbrella, organizations have access to a higher-level plan than they would on their own. For example, an association of credit unions could purchase an EAP as a group; then, each individual credit union could customize the EAP for its specific employee population.

The best EAP companies will talk with association executives to discover their individual needs. In order for a plan to be truly relevant and helpful, its design

must take into account a level of flexibility and customization. If one member has a higher need of child care or work-life-balance information, the EAP should recognize this and deliver those services accordingly.

By matching the program components to specific demographics and needs, the association as a whole is likely to achieve higher EAP utilization. After the program's rollout, the association executive can also receive detailed tracking reports regarding overall usage by employees.

Helping Employees Stay Focused. Studies have repeatedly shown that when people are stressed or confused, they're far less focused on work. This is where a well-structured EAP can help. Often in these cases, employees simply need to talk with someone. If they feel supported, they're more likely to return to the workplace sooner, ready to be productive.

As a first step in working with an association, an EAP might ask employees to complete a personal resiliency survey, designed to help individuals discover their innate strengths when dealing with challenges. This survey results will help EAP develop employee strengths as well as identify resources that can aid them during tough times. In addition to helping people proactively prepare and increase their resiliency, a good EAP should offer extensive phone, online and on-site support as part of its services.

The variety of resources an EAP provides is key to maintaining a resilient workplace, especially for smaller associations that might not have the internal capacity for this kind of support on their own. EAPs have been shown to help reduce absenteeism, increase productivity in the workplace and even boost member health.

An effective EAP will address the full spectrum of resiliency needs, from everyday marital or financial concerns to organization-wide disasters. In times of loss or confusion, employees aren't functioning at 100 percent. They're often anxious or upset, and that's natural. The role of an EAP is to help them get through the experience, back on their feet and back to work. ■

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