



Public Sector Reform



MAKING BARBADOS WORK BETTER

Employee Assistance Programme – Office of Public Sector Reform Barbados

Overview

Managers are often preoccupied with outputs that essentially measure productivity, profitability and customer service. This focus on outcomes is not surprising since many organizations exist to fulfill these output objectives. However, it must be recognized that the major input of any organization is labour. Today one of the major objectives of the Human Resource practitioner is to develop techniques to enhance worker motivation, productivity and performance. This is no easy task since the rapid pace and unparalleled degree of changes in the workplace has caused much uncertainty and insecurity amongst workers, underscoring the importance of Human Resource Management.

The Human Resource model emphasizes the treatment of workers as individuals rather than part of a collective workforce and encourages workers to consider management as ‘partners’ rather than as opponents. In this regard, the government of Barbados has recognized that as an employer of 29,000 employees considerable manpower days are lost due to matters relating to the physical and psychological condition of its employees.

Physiologists maintain that depression is a normal reaction to loss, life’s struggles, or an injured self-esteem. But sometimes the feeling of sadness becomes intense, lasting for long periods and prevents persons from leading a normal life.

A leading psychologist – Mr. Anderson Kellman (Network Services – Barbados) - maintains that depression is one of the major illnesses that impacts on the productivity of Barbados' workforce. The symptoms of depression include loss of energy, difficulty in concentrating and decision making, in addition to headaches and unexplained aches and pains. He also asserts that because persons suffering from depression only focus on negatives they often affect work teams in a similar fashion.

Impact on the Workforce

Whilst there are no official figures for Barbados in regard to the impact of depression on the workforce, research in the United States has shown that persons with depressive symptoms spend more days in bed than those suffering from diabetes, arthritis, back problems, and gastrointestinal disorders. Depression costs employers in the US about \$44 billion dollars a year in lost production time, of this amount, it accounts for close to \$12 billion in lost days alone. More than \$ 11 billion in other cost accrue from decreased production due to the symptoms of depression; costs escalate still further if worker's untreated depression contributes to alcohol or drug abuse. However, most lost time occurs while people are at work. People are making it to work but they're just not engaged in the work. They are getting to the work site but then not performing or functioning on the job. Many managers identify this as presentism.

Overcoming productivity destabilizers

The main purpose of counseling is not to solve a person's problems but to try to get them to put their problems into perspective and to see what they themselves can do to solve them. In this context counseling services are offered to individual public sector employees and their immediate family, group counseling, critical incident stress management, and debriefings for personnel in the emergency services, in addition to coaching for senior managers and departmental intervention.

Details of the Programme

In 1998 the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) was introduced as a reform initiative in the Barbados Public Service. The benchmark used was the standards and practices of the Employee Assistance Professional Association (EAPA) based in the United States. The programme is open to all employees in the public service and their immediate family, regardless of their status, job title or responsibilities. It offers public sector managers an alternative tool with regard to confronting job performance problems in the workplace by assisting in the identification and successful resolution of productivity problems associated with employees impaired by personal concerns such as loss, depression, stress, financial or legal difficulties, and domestic problems. A synopsis of the programme is noted as under:

An agency – Network Services Centre – has been contracted to provide EAP services to public employees and provides a wide range of professionals who are trained to deal with the problems outlined above in a confidential manner.

Counselling sessions are held at Network Services Centre during office hours and where necessary, at the work place. Alternative meeting places are not ruled out.

The types of services available are - Individual counseling, Family counseling and Group counseling.

Employees need only call the EAP as soon as he/she feels that a problem is getting too difficult to handle alone and it is affecting his/her job performance. Once they make that call they are immediately connected to a counselor who is experienced in helping them identify the nature of their problems and finding the right resources to address them.

In other instances a supervisor may and can also encourage an employee to take advantage of the EAP when it is evident that the employee's productivity, or lack of, is cause for concern. A family member may also initiate the request for help making an appointment for the person in question.

A counsellor from Network Services Centre can answer any questions about the services available to public officers. The counselor may also ask officers a few questions initially to help them determine the right resources/approaches required for their particular situation.

The Office of Public Sector Reform and Network Services Centre believe that maintaining the confidentiality of EAP services is a fundamental right to which everyone is entitled. Therefore all records, including medical information, referrals and evaluations are kept in strict confidence. The Office has conducted this programme in such an effective and confidential manner that over 4,000 employees have received individual counseling since the inception of the programme in addressing a wide variety of problems.

The employer, in this case, the Government, meets the cost of the first three visits for each officer and employees are given a 20 percent discount on subsequent visits if they wish to continue therapy. Employees are required to submit their National Insurance numbers as clear proof of employment.

The various levels of professionals and counselors involved fall into the following categories:

- Executive Director
- Psychologists
- Psychiatrists
- Family counselors
- Substance abuse counselors
- Seminar/workshop leaders
- Motivational speakers

In the overall application of the programme the following benefits are accrued.

The employee benefits through:

- Early identification and resolution of personal and health-related problems;
- Improvement in mental and physical health; and

- A higher level of confidence and self-esteem.
- The employer benefits through:
 - Increased productivity;
 - Higher office morale; and
 - Reduction in time lost away from work due to sickness and absenteeism.

Recent research in Barbados has indicated that public servants and their managers and supervisors have become increasingly aware of the relationship between a person's well being and his/her impact on the working environment and work teams. Since the inception of the programme recent figures indicate that the highest level of utilization of EAP comes from persons categorized as "caregivers," such as persons in the health, education and law enforcement agencies. There is also a growing awareness among supervisory / management staff of the benefits of using the EAP. Of those persons seeking counseling during 2004 only 3% of all cases were directly related to occupational issues. Yet, 19% of all persons seeking counseling indicated that their job performance was affected by their personal problems.

In addition to the services outlined above the Office of Public Sector Reform through Network Services Centre conducts approximately 200 workshops / seminars per year in addressing emotional and psychological issues which have the potential to affect the productivity of officers in various departments. These workshops explore issues such as managing violence in the workplace, stress management, constructive confrontation for supervisors, personal empowerment and team building, grief / bereavement counseling, frontline counseling, and change management. There was a sharp increase in the number of workshops held after March 2005 when there was a crisis of the burning of the local Prison by inmates and the programme was used in a timely and effective manner in addressing traumatized prison officers. Recent interventions also include attention to Postal Office staff after a robbery and the loss of three senior students, in a vehicular accident, from a secondary school (Deighton Griffith).

The Office of Public Sector Reform in conjunction with Network Services will be shortly introducing a workshop that will explicitly deal with Money Management and focus on issues such as attitudes to spending and planning for major financial goals, development of a spending plan and techniques for building wealth.

The government of Barbados has recognized that the long term benefits of the EAP can help to reduce overall medical health care claims, workers compensation, and disability cost through the proper assessment and referral of high risk employees to effective behavioural health and substance abuse programmes. In addition it seeks to improve employee's performance through reduced absenteeism and greater productivity. Also in balancing organizational change with attitudinal change the EAP is a very relevant initiative.