

## **Employee Assistance Programmes – Overcoming Productivity Barriers**

by Jennifer Ward – Garnes, Communications Officer, Office of Public Sector Reform

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 26,000 employees considerable manpower days are lost due to matters relating to the physical and psychological condition of its employees.

In 1998 the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) was introduced as a reform initiative in the Public Service. The EAP adheres to the standards and practices of the Employee Assistance Professional Association (EAPA) based in the United States. The association is an umbrella body for all Employee Assistance and Work Life Programmes, comprising over 5000 members worldwide. 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.

### **Holiday Blues**

Mr. Anderson Kellman of Network Services contends that January is a peak period for counselors since for many persons the festive season is not festive at all. Issues such as debt, loss, bereavement, and poor family relations often manifest themselves at Christmas and translate to persons seeking help in January. The counselor indicated that for many people Christmas can be a lonely and difficult period, especially for those persons suffering from loss. Loss issues generally relate to death, separation, divorce, and childlessness and can be particularly destabilizing often leading to depression. The counselor also

indicated that a major factor leading to depression, especially in January is poor financial management. He suggested that easy access to credit during the latter part of the year often leads persons into a debt trap, eventually leading to depression.

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.

Mr. Kellman 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.

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. For the period March 2002 – March 2003 approximately 236 public officers from sixty-four (64) Ministries / departments utilized four hundred and eighty four (484) counseling hours. It is significant to note 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. 69% of all persons seen were self – referrals, while 14% supervisor referred, the other 17% were referred by family members or other sources. These figures indicate that supervisor referral increased by 6% over the corresponding period last year, which suggest a growing awareness among supervisory / management staff of the benefits of using the EAP. Of those persons seeking counseling 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 conducted sixty –eight (68) workshop / seminars to address emotional and psychological issues which have the potential to affect the productivity of officers in various departments. These workshops explored 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.

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. (Public Servants who are interested in this programme should contact the Office of Public Sector Reform at 426-4618 for further details).

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.