

A Win-Win Partnership: MRE and Employee Assistance Programs

Marriage and relationship education in the workplace

Employers are interested in a healthy, vibrant workforce that will ultimately enable their company to be successful and profitable. As a result, many larger companies offer Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) that provide assessment, support, and referrals as needed to aid their employees (see text box). EAPs can address work-related productivity issues including healthy intimate partner relationships (see additional resources).

Recently, there has been a wealth of research highlighting the value of strong marriages/relationships in employee productivity and the company's bottom line. Employees who have successful relationships and marriages have been shown to be more loyal to the companies they serve. For example, happily married men have reduced job turnover rates. Further, they show lower rates of absenteeism and "presenteeism" than single men.

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are employee benefit programs typically offered in conjunction with an employer's health insurance plan. EAPs work with companies to address productivity issues by assisting employees with personal issues that may negatively impact their work performance, health, and well-being.



(Presenteeism describes employees that are present and often work extended hours, but because of illness, low morale, or poor attitude, contribute to productivity losses).

This Tip Sheet is for relationship education service providers. It provides information on how to successfully introduce and incorporate your marriage and relationship education (MRE) program into a company's EAP. An EAP is a logical partner for your MRE program. EAPs have an established delivery mechanism for reaching employers and their employees. However, most EAPs are not looking for you or your services. EAPs likely will not know about the impact of relational wellness in the workplace. It will be your job to educate them in this area and to recommend your services to them. Be prepared to explain what MRE is, its track record and why it's successful.

The Pitch

Cold calls are probably the least effective way to make contact and introduce MRE. If there is a large employer you are hoping to serve, check with its Human Resources (HR) department to see if they can introduce you to the company's EAP contact person. Alternatively, you may be able to connect with the EAP directly. Use contacts from your executive team, your Board of Directors, etc. Anyone in your network of acquaintances who can help you approach the EAP is appropriate. If you are unable to find someone within your immediate network who can connect you with an EAP associate, you may want to contact an organization, such as the Employee Assistance Professionals Association, Inc.

As a part of your outreach activities, you may want to invite HR professionals, EAP leaders and key business professionals in your community to attend a "Lunch and Learn." This will be a great way to make them aware of what MRE is and why it matters. Provide the attendees lunch and conduct a brief presentation. Teach a key skill to let them experience for themselves the value of your service.

Do Your Homework - Before approaching the EAP, you will need to know how it delivers services to employees. Work within the system the EAP has already established. Is the EAP strictly a phone-based consultation service? Then tailor your offerings for phone delivery. Does the EAP offer on-site services? Then create a program that works easily for that model. Realize that if you're offering programs that will cost the EAP more than it gains in return, your pitch won't be successful. It will be necessary to customize your material, model, and even language to fit their delivery needs.

Prepare yourself with answers to potential questions. Many EAPs will have questions about how MRE

can apply to everyone in their workforce such as singles, widowed, dating, those involved in same-sex relationships, etc. If you can help the EAP avoid issues with the employer (such as when some staff members feel they are being discriminated against because the services don't apply), you've done your job well. You will also need to address any concerns regarding confidentiality and explain that MRE (unlike counseling or therapy) does not require employees to divulge personal information. You will make the EAP look good and likely secure a long-term partner in the effort to strengthen relationships.

Talk Business - After you set up a meeting with decision makers in the EAP, be clear in your presentation. As much as possible, speak the language of the business – not the language of marriage educators or the non-profit world. For example, you will want to familiarize yourself with what is meant by "problem identification/assessment" and discuss how these services can increase employee engagement, lower turnover rates, and are transferable to workplace relationships. Similarly, you want to educate the EAP on the lingo of marriage education. Explain the differences between MRE and counseling, what a marriage educator or relationship coach is, etc. Make sure you have a clearly defined business model in place. Describe the frequency of your workshops, how many people can participate per workshop and the format of the workshop. Adequately present the information. You must be focused, succinct, and realistic in what you provide to the EAP.

Demonstrate how your services could help the EAP improve productivity, decrease absenteeism and presenteeism, improve morale, and increase retention in a company's workforce. Whenever possible, provide them with research-based points to illustrate these key elements (see Additional Resources).



Be very clear in co-defining success with the EAP. In fact, you should create a shared definition of success. For example, success could mean:

- Number of contact hours with employees
- Number of employees attending education sessions
- Employee morale will be improved by x (use a given measure of employee satisfaction already in place by the company)

The metric itself isn't what is most important. It's most important that you and the EAP agree on *how* to measure success. Measurable goals ensure accountability for you, the EAP, and the employer. When considering the success of your partnership with any given EAP, only promise what you are sure can be delivered.

The Delivery

The delivery of your MRE services is the fun part. This is likely what you enjoy the most – the actual face-to-face teaching, educating, and consulting that goes along with quality MRE services. Follow through with all the promises you made during the pitch. Doing so will “wow” any EAP and ensure there are no unmet expectations or disappointments.

Be Responsive and Positive - When the EAP or employees you serve have questions, comments, or concerns, be responsive. Nobody likes to wait three days for an email response or returned voice message. Respond within 24 hours if at all possible. Remember that you represent the EAP to the employee. They don't know the behind-the-scenes arrangement you've worked out with the EAP. Your participants just know they came to a class to learn healthy relationship skills or spoke with someone who could help them with their marriage.

Be open to feedback about services provided, curriculum used, etc. and create an environment where process improvement is expected and valued. Your agreement with the EAP should allow for you to alter your services based on participant feedback.

Don't rely on the EAP to market your services. Make a point of training HR directors of participating companies so they will be able to answer basic questions. It's also important to provide them with resources and/or a link to your website for employees to learn more. Additionally, internal marketing and how your services are presented to employees within the business is critical. A flier on a company bulletin board is unlikely to do the job. Consider piloting your program at low or no-cost to demonstrate its worth to employees and employers.

Prove Your Worth - Word of mouth is a valuable recruitment tool. Remember that EAPs must prove their worth using monetary metrics. Your partnership will grow stronger as the EAP succeeds. This does not happen overnight. It takes diligence, persistence, and time to forge the type of professional partnership with an EAP that delivers both short-term and long-term results for all parties involved.

Working cooperatively with a company's EAP to provide MRE services is an opportunity for the

company to contribute to the wellness of their employees. In turn, this will make employees more productive and valuable to the company. It is also an excellent chance for your MRE program to shine. Deliver your MRE program in the most effective and responsive manner to ensure a lasting partnership with EAP.

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Additional Resources

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