

Workplace Chaplains:

Filling a Need Traditional EAPs Can't Meet

by Joe Meyer and Elaine Davis

► More organizations are finding secular counseling provided by **employee assistance programs (EAPs)** is inadequate for many employees. As a result, increasing numbers of employers are providing services of workplace chaplains. Chaplain services are not necessarily part of the recent fad toward "spirituality" in organizations, but rather address the needs of an increasingly nonchurchgoing culture living in a more stressful world. ◀

In today's rapidly changing world, employees are dealing with more stressful lives. There has also been a substantial loss of community in Americans' lives; this is seen directly in fewer interactions with neighbors and extended families. It is also evident in reduced numbers at religious ceremonies: only 31% of Americans regularly attend a church, less than half of the percentage that attended during the 1970s. The lack of extended relationships leaves many people without the support to handle personal difficulties. As we spend more hours at work and less in relationships, employees and many employers are looking more for help from the workplace. According to the Gallup Organization, 95% of Americans say they believe in God or a universal spirit and 48% said they talked about religious faith at work that day.¹ Lutheran Brotherhood, a Minnesota-based insurance company, recently surveyed clients and found that 70% of them talk about their faith in the workplace.² Faith is on the minds of employees.

Each year, more than one out of every seven employees is faced with personal problems that seriously affect his or her job performance. These problems may include marriage and family issues, drug and alcohol addiction, financial and legal problems, as well as many work-related stresses. Employee assistance programs (EAPs) have proved to be very successful at handling employee problems and crises. According to a recent survey conducted by the Bureau of National Affairs (BNA), 69% of employers provide EAPs as a benefit for their employees. EAP use results in reduced absenteeism, fewer sick days and greater productivity. The BNA survey released in May 2000 reported that 65% of employers utilizing EAPs reduced their health plan costs.³ Forty percent of companies using EAPs also reported lower workers' compensation costs, and over half the firms reduced their disability costs.

However, one of the drawbacks cited by firms that offer EAPs is the low rate of utilization by employees. Most firms report only a 4% to 8% rate of use by eligible employees.⁴ The common factor that appears to keep many employees away from the service is the perceived stigma attached to seeking help from a therapist or psychologist.

In the past, chaplains were used extensively in workplaces that deal with daily trauma. Hospitals, police and fire departments and the armed services considered chaplains as standard positions within these organizations. People working in jobs with daily exposure to traumatic events have someone they know and trust to help them cope with traumatic experiences that are unique to their occupations. These organizations understand the value that chaplains have on the well-being and productivity of their staff.

Most other types of organizations traditionally do not incorporate religion or faith into their counseling services. However, there is a growing number of faith-based EAPs across the country, and more firms are utilizing chaplains to counsel and support employees on an ongoing basis. Chaplains, unlike secular EAPs, provide spiritual support and counseling. Current estimates are that close to 5,000 chaplains provide support services to businesses and their employees in the United States.⁵ This number has doubled from six years ago, and current service providers project the number to double again in the next six years.⁶

WORKPLACE MINISTRY

The two largest providers of chaplains in the workplace are InnerActive Ministries of Wake Forest, North Carolina and Marketplace Ministries of Dallas, Texas. These firms alone employ over 800 chaplains and have helped establish national educational programs for training and guidelines for chaplain certification. These are both Christian-based nondenominational organizations that also help clients access chaplains of diverse faiths such as Buddhist monks and Jewish rabbis. Both firms are experiencing double-digit annual growth in new clients and staff. Gil Strickland, founder of Marketplace Ministries, stated, "Our passion is to show care and concern, along with God's love to workers in corporate America." This is where faith-based EAPs excel.

A faith-based EAP is not usually seen as an alternative to a secular EAP but as an enhancement. In times of need, such as illness, death, violence, divorce, drug and alcohol abuse, faith-based programs take on greater meaning for many employees. Chaplains are able to reach

another level in caregiving and support not comparable with a secular EAP service provider. Most recently, the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City created a huge demand for spiritual counseling that went beyond what a secular counselor could provide. Organizations, particularly in the New York area, reported a significant increase in requests for chaplains or ministerial services.

Mark Cress, CEO and president of InnerActive Ministries, calls his services a "safety net for employees," a person to turn to, someone employees know, not a stranger. Rosemary Boyd, a chaplain in St. Cloud, Minnesota, stated that it is a chaplain's responsibility to "see to the spiritual needs of the employees that management cannot fulfill due to the nature of the management and employee relationship." Chaplains do not evangelize or preach religion; they meet the spiritual needs of the individual and act as an advocate for the employee. Talking with a chaplain at work has a much lower stigma than seeing a therapist. Many employees that would not use a therapist through an EAP willingly share their concerns with a visiting chaplain.

Not only do chaplains provide support in times of crisis, they also minister to employees' ongoing needs for spirituality. Some chaplains offer workshops, seminars and training sessions on spiritual topics. Many businesses offer chapels, prayer rooms and meditation areas for their employees. Chaplains can contribute to a firm's ability to recognize religious diversity and understand the needs of employees. They are able to help give employers guidelines on what the methods of expression are for different religious groups, holy days that are important for a group of employees, and how to be sensitive to religion.

Firms are beginning to recognize the importance of religious expression among an increasingly diverse workforce. According to a recent survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, religious diversity is increasing rapidly in our country.⁷ Former SHRM president and CEO, Helen Drinan, recently stated, "It's important to view religious accommodation not just as a way to avoid legal claims, but

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rather as an opportunity to increase retention and boost the cohesiveness and productivity of the workforce." For example, Gold'n Plump, a Minnesota-based poultry processor, employs large numbers of people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. They've learned the importance of allowing these groups to express themselves through religious clothing, etc. Doing so has had the unintended benefit of drawing numerous applicants from diverse ethnic groups. Employees at Gold'n Plump know the firm cares about their needs and respects their religion.

CHAPLAINS AS COMMUNICATIONS TOOLS

Chaplains also serve as "ears" for management. They are held to strict confidentiality with employee problems (unless they believe the employee poses a significant threat to others), but they are able to provide management with general insights and information on hot topics or areas of concern for employees. Without notice, these issues may go undetected or be considered trivial problems by management. They also notice small issues that can affect employee morale, productivity and turnover. Cress of InnerActive Ministries said, "A lot of what the employer sees is the tip of the iceberg." Chaplains that make frequent visits become sounding boards for employee issues. The information chaplains provide management can

help increase the effectiveness of managers and the human resources department.

Cress stressed the importance of the ability of a chaplain to help owners shape communications and make decisions to alleviate potential problems and handle issues before they become critical. This is one of the biggest benefits that his clients offer when asked about his services. Cress stated, "People bring their problems to work with them, and to the extent that we can talk them through some options and help them emotionally with some of these issues, we can help them be more productive and happier at work." Most chaplains' visits are typically made weekly for general socialization, trust building and for counseling sessions, but they are on call for employees 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Some people believe that chaplains only directly benefit individuals who are not members of a church. However, Gil Strickland, president of Marketplace Ministries, points out that many churchgoers do not want to tell their own ministers about their personal problems. They become too close to their ministers to share personal weaknesses. They will, however, utilize a chaplain that they know, but not as well.

RESEARCH SUPPORT

There is no quantitative research yet on the value added for firms using chaplains except for anecdotal information. Austaco, a large Pizza Hut and Taco Bell franchisee corporation, has reduced its annual turnover from 300% to 125%. They credit the chaplain program from Marketplace Ministries for this dramatic decrease. Employees are using the services and credit it with improving their lives.

According to Dr. Diana Dale, executive director of the National Institute of Business and Industrial Chaplains (NIBIC), it is very difficult to conduct research and separate out what factors to measure—attendance, accidents, productivity, morale—and isolate what causes change. There is a growing body of research that addresses "spirituality in the workplace." This research is tapping into organizations that have put spiritual themes into mission statements, goals and objectives, made corporate ethics a paramount theme and do spiritual retreats, among other things.

A study completed by McKinsey & Co. found that productivity improved and turnover was reduced when companies offered programs that use spiritual techniques for their employees.⁸ Ian I. Mitroff, professor of business policy at the University of Southern California, has researched and written extensively about spirituality in the workplace. "A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America," co-authored by Mitroff, found that organizations considered to be spiritual by their employees had less fearful and more ethical employees.⁹ They also were more committed to their jobs and considered their firms a step above their competitors. The study found employees wanted to be associated with a good, ethical organization.¹⁰ Firms that allow and encourage employees to express their spirituality harness the spiritual energy and passion of each employee. Mitroff says, "Fully 60% of those polled for the book say they believe in the beneficial effects of spirituality in the workplace, so long as there's no bully-pulpit promotion of traditional religion."

CONCERNS ABOUT CHAPLAINS

Most chaplain programs incorporate a code of conduct that does not allow evangelizing, yet certain chaplains may promote their religious views. Furthermore, in some organizations that offer chaplain services, evangelizing is included in their mission statements. This has occurred in privately held organizations where the owners promote their religion to employees and encourage the chaplains to do so. This doesn't sit well with most employees. Americans view religion and spirituality very differently. Mitroff and Denton's research, "A Study of Spirituality in the Workplace," found widely different views of religion and spirituality. Survey respondents viewed *religion as a highly inappropriate form of expression in the workplace* yet they viewed *spirituality as appropriate for the workplace*. These views may stem from the principles in the founding of our country and our right to freedom from religious oppression and discrimination.

Employers considering hiring a chaplain need to understand the chaplain's view on evangelizing and religious recruitment. Some employers go as far as removing the title of chaplain, preferring the softer "spiritual coach." This may also help remove any stigma felt by

certain employees toward chaplains because they assume they are all Christian.

There are some critics with greater causes for concern involving chaplains in the workplace. Lewis Maltby of the American Civil Liberties Union says, "It could easily slide into coercion, even subtle coercion."¹¹ Employees may rebel if they feel that they are being preached to or recruited. There may be potential legal problems that could leave the business with liability issues as well as productivity and morale issues. An overzealous chaplain from an organization that promotes evangelizing could be very damaging to employees and businesses.

A final concern relates to credentials. Recently, a whole array of untrained people have picked up on the title "chaplain" and gone into companies, and many of these people also want to proselytize. To avoid problems, look for clinically trained chaplains, who over the years have gotten licensures and other certifications beyond seminary training.

CONCLUSION

Anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that offering chaplain services is of real value to organizations, but research studies have not been conducted yet to give us empirical data to support these conclusions. Clearly, it is an area in need of study. Statistical analysis of similar firms with and without chaplain programs that compare financial benchmarks would be of great value.

Employers may tend to err on the side of avoiding all spirituality and religion in the workplace due to concerns about legal issues regarding discrimination, harassment and civil

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liberties. Many fear evangelical efforts and potential conflicts. However, if your firm is a trendsetter in benefit offerings or has specific problems that you feel need the attention of a chaplain program, now may be the time to explore this as an enhancement to an existing EAP. Companies with diverse employee groups may especially want to consider a chaplain as a spiritual guide who helps to bring care and continuity to religious policy and expression.

What we do know is this: Many employees have no emotional and spiritual support in their lives. Personal problems are more frequent, more severe and more complex than in the past, and they impact our workplace economically. Many employees need nonsecular counseling, and firms that provide such services can only benefit from them. The emerging trend to place chaplains in the workplace has great potential to positively impact organizations. ◀

Endnotes

1. Michelle Conlin, "Religion in the Workplace," *Business Week*, November 1, 1999.
2. Sandra Baker, "Faith at Work," *Tarrant Business*, September 7, 1998.
3. Ibid.
4. Margaret Miller, "Employee Assistance Plans Evolving to Meet New Workplace Challenges," July 31, 2001. SHRM Web site: www.shrm.org.
5. Interview with Mark Cress, CEO and president of InnerActive Ministries.
6. Ibid.
7. SHRM and Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, "Religious Diversity in the Workplace," June 25, 2001.
8. Michelle Conlin, "Religion in the Workplace," *Business Week*, November 1, 1999.
9. Ibid.
10. Ian I. Mitroff and Elizabeth A. Denton, "A Study of Spirituality in the Workplace," *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Volume 40, Summer 1999.
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Further Information on Chaplains

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- ELCA Information available online at www.elca.org.
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