
The Power of Peers in Employee Assistance: A Unique Program for a Community College

Marcia D. Hills

University of Victoria

Peggy Johnson, Cathy Michalenko, Oonagh Docherty,
Joanne Bucklee

Red Deer College

Abstract

Employee Assistance programs have traditionally been directed from near the top of an institutional or organizational structure, and have typically focused on addiction problems affecting job performance. The Red Deer College program REACH (Resources for Employee Assistance, Counselling and Health) has moved beyond this traditional approach to become an autonomous program run by employees for employees. The program is concerned with the general well being of workers at the college. This paper describes the REACH program with a particular emphasis on the innovative development of the Peer Support program.

Résumé

Les programmes d'assistance aux employés sont par tradition dirigés par des gens situés au haut de la structure institutionnelle ou organisationnelle, et centrent habituellement leur action sur les problèmes de dépendance affectant la performance au travail. Le programme de Red Deer REACH (Resources for Employee Assistance, Counselling and Health) a franchi cette approche traditionnelle pour devenir un programme autonome dirigé par les employés pour les employés. Ce programme est concerné par le bien-être des travailleurs au collège. Cet article décrit le programme REACH avec une emphase particulière sur le développement innovatif du programme de Support par les Pairs.

Employee assistance programs have existed for a number of years. Traditionally these programs have been established to respond to the institution's or administration's concern with employees' problems that affect job performance. In most cases these programs have been primarily concerned with drug addiction. Recently some innovative programs have moved beyond the traditional model. The Red Deer College program REACH (Resources for Employee Assistance, Counselling and Health), is such an example; an autonomous program run by employees for employees. In addition to being concerned with job performance, the REACH program is designed to facilitate the development of coping skills that contribute to both individual and family well being. The purpose of this paper is to describe the development of REACH with particular emphasis on the Peer Support program.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE—DEVELOPING THE REACH PROGRAM

The original Employees Assistance Program at Red Deer College began in 1983. Although such programs often have their roots in contractual

agreements, this program began outside such a contractual framework. A group of people representing various employee groups, established as an Employee Assistance Program Committee, agreed on the need to address certain health and lifestyle problems within the framework of institutional functioning. The intent was not merely to improve job performance, but also to humanize the workplace, to assist people in dealing with personal and professional difficulties, and to make the college a more pleasant and productive place to work.

The program, however, did have certain problems. Reflecting the philosophical approaches current at the time, the EAP program was seen as something imposed upon the employee, albeit with tact and sensitivity. Typical of many such programs, its intent was to provide for "recognition, treatment, referral, and follow-up of an employee whose health/lifestyle problems seriously or continuously affects his/her job before such condition renders the person unemployable." This model was adopted by the College Board of Governors in 1985.

The program placed special emphasis on the remediation of health and lifestyle problems, assuming that such problems were as treatable as other illnesses. Supervisors were given the primary responsibility for identification of problems and referring individuals to the EAP. It was assumed that most situations would require the intervention of outside specialists, and the Occupational Health Nurse was designated as the referral agent. The first annual report indicates that the nurse held nine information and training sessions, involving a total of 37 supervisors, and she held two seminars for support staff with a total of 181 staff attending. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1985-86 year, only six staff members had availed themselves of the program. In a college of over 450 employees, this was a very small number, especially as the literature indicates that 10% of employees (at Red Deer College, 45) are typically in need of assistance. It was at this point that the EAP committee began to take stock of the situation and consider its directions.

The EAP committee was greatly assisted in reorienting its activities by a series of educational opportunities, the first being the EAP Wellness Conference, sponsored by the North Orange County Community College District of California. Geared specially to post-secondary education, this conference stressed two themes. First, the EAP programs should not continue with an exclusively "treatment for problems" philosophy. Instead it should place more emphasis on prevention of problems through education and promotion of wellness. Second, the EAP programs should recognize the employees' family as being involved in his or her wellness, and consequently should make its services available to them as well. A third and related theme was introduced by Jake Epp (1986), Minister of National Health and Welfare, in his document entitled "Achieving Health for All: A Framework for Health

Promotion," given at the Canadian Mental Health Association Conference on "Health in the Workplace." Mr. Epp emphasized the need to promote individuals' enhanced coping skills, a greater sense of their own responsibility, and involvement in health for effective functioning.

As a result of the assessment, the EAP committee adopted three philosophical principles. The first was to emphasize education and prevention over treatment. The second was to encourage the development of personal responsibility for health. The third was to recognize the employee's family context. These philosophical principles were incorporated into the program by making certain changes and are reflected in the new name REACH, (Resources for Employee Assistance, Counselling and Health).

The first changes made were essentially organizational, concerning committee structure, responsibilities, and funding. The committee appointed a chairperson and became more formal in contrast to its previous existence where it had functioned in a much more casual manner. Reporting relationships were clarified so that the committee reiterated its stance of being advisory to the President of the College. Weekly meetings of the committee replaced the former ad hoc meetings, and regular meetings with the College President were set up. Funding was established in 1987 by the UIC Rebate Committee. The UIC Rebate Committee was established at Red Deer College to administer and disburse the Unemployment Insurance Commission premium reduction funds received by the College, in accordance with the guidelines given by the Commission. The College committee is composed of a representative from each of the four employee groups—support staff, CUPE, faculty, and administration.

The funding provides operating money as well as a trust fund to assist employees and their families in accessing initial counselling programs or services. An agreement was reached with the College whereby funds in trust would be matched by the College. This funding makes possible the variety of programmes offered by REACH, and enables outside professional assistance to be provided to employees and their families on a cost shared basis (involving the employee, REACH, and the college benefits programme). As well, the committee recently received a donation through the Red Deer College Foundation to be used for programs which would benefit employees' quality of life. The committee has also drawn up a set of policies and guidelines, including guidelines for the use of funds.

The second major area of change to the employee assistance program was the strengthening of the educational and health promotion emphasis. The committee compiled a list of community resources available for personal and professional help. It began an educational program with two workshops on "Money Management and Budgeting" and "Coping

With Professional and Personal Change.” It sponsored health promotion programmes in weight reduction and smoking cessation, and it has also arranged corporate rates at the city’s various fitness clubs.

A third and crucial change to the program was the development of a co-operative support network.

THE PEER SUPPORT TEAM

The development of a co-operative support network was based on the premise that when people are experiencing difficulties, they most often turn to their peers for support. Peer support in the work place is consistent with Honourable Jake Epp’s (1986) second health promotion mechanism, mutual aid. As he states . . . “It implies people helping each other, supporting each other emotionally, sharing ideas, information and experiences” (p. 7). Discussions with local and national resource people in peer support led to the establishment of a peer support team at the college. Peer supporters are people who have been trained to listen to others’ concerns. A peer supporter is someone who cares about others and talks to them about their thoughts and feelings. Rather than being an advice-giver or problem solver a peer supporter is a sensitive listener who uses communication skills to facilitate self-exploration and decision-making (Carr & Saunders, 1980). The intent was that by providing understanding and training in problem solving, communication and decision-making skills, a more supportive and caring atmosphere would be created. It was not intended that peer supporters would substitute for professional help.

An announcement inviting employees to volunteer to become members of the peer support team was circulated throughout the college. Fifty-five people responded to this request. In order to keep the program small and maintain high standards, only fifteen respondents were selected to participate. In making the selection, several criteria were considered. The team needed to be representative of the four employee groups—support staff, CUPE, faculty and administration. The team members needed to be physically distributed throughout the college. Finally, the male/female ratio of team members needed to be balanced. Once established, the peer support team participated in a weekend retreat for peer support training.

THE TRAINING

In order to escape the many distractions at the College, the training occurred at a tranquil cross country ski resort called Terratima, located outside of Red Deer. The cost of the retreat was funded by the REACH program.

The fifteen members of the peer support team and four REACH

committee members participated in a two-day intensive training program facilitated by Dr. Marcia Hills of the University of Victoria. The program focussed on learning support skills such as empathic listening and expressing feelings. Participants explored sensitive issues such as confidentiality and elitism that are inherent in the establishment of new programs such as peer support. In addition, the employees examined their beliefs and values regarding support and participated in several self-awareness exercises. A process-oriented methodology (Hills, 1987) was used to ensure that the employees would learn the skills in a personally meaningful way. The use of discussion, demonstration, role play and practice encouraged personal integration of skills into each employee's particular style of relating. A unique aspect of this training program was that the participants lived together for the duration of the training. This added dimension of sharing meals, walks, laughs and accommodation provided many opportunities for learning to be supportive.

Following this intensive training, the team continued to meet approximately once a month. During these meetings, the team members provided support for each other as they discussed issues and experiences that they had encountered as peer supporters. The team began to draw on the resources of the group as individual members took responsibility for presenting or facilitating a session. In addition, the team arranged to have several guest speakers attend their meetings. Having been left on its own to struggle with issues of identity and direction, the team began to emerge with a more formal structure. A chairperson was elected to chair meetings and set an agenda.

One issue which the team had to resolve was how to promote the team members and the team's services. After much deliberation, the team recognized the importance of raising its profile in order to become more accessible to other employees but it wanted to avoid being seen as elite or exclusive. In the spring the team held a tea and invited all college employees to attend. Peer-Support sweatshirts were available for purchase. This social occasion succeeded in making the college employees more aware of the concept of peer support, the availability of services for employees and the identity of members of the peer support team.

In September, one year after the training retreat, the initial peer support team members returned to Terratima for a one-day workshop. A second group of fifteen employees was recruited to participate in the two-day peer support training at Terratime. A format similar to the initial retreat was followed to train these employees in peer support skills. After the second group completed the training, all members of the two groups met together back at the college to consolidate into one peer support team. This type of incremental growth will continue. A training manual "The Power of Peers" (Hills, in press) has been developed for

use by the Peer Support team as a self-help guide. The manual will be used by the team to train additional members. The support team will eventually become totally autonomous.

THE IMPACT OF THE PROGRAMS

The peer support members were asked to use the form outlined in Fig. 1 to keep a record of contacts that were made in their capacity as peer supporters. From September 1987 to April 1988, 56 individuals contacted a peer supporter on 84 occasions. In addition, the REACH program served a total of 154 employees (34% of the college population) and 101 individuals were involved with health promotion and educational programs. Thirty-one people requested and received professional assistance for an average of four visits each and they reported that the experience either helped or resolved their problems.

When the peer support team members were asked to reflect on their experiences over the previous year they reported significant personal and professional changes. One individual stated that she had recently assisted a colleague who had experienced the death of a spouse. The peer supporter commented that in her opinion she previously would never have been able to talk calmly to her co-worker. Being a member of the peer support team had given her the skills and confidence to be able to listen to the other's grief.

Another team member related a shift in thinking about the boundaries that exist between levels of workers at the college. This individual experienced an ease in interacting with colleagues who he might have previously viewed as "too different" from him professionally to relate to. This ability to interact more freely between a shop technician and a faculty member or between a support staff and an administrator was commented on several times and was viewed by administration as one of the greatest benefits of the program.

The evaluations of the workshops, the statistics and the self reports of the team members all support the success of the REACH and Peer Support Programs.

CONCLUSION

From its experience of developing the REACH program and initiating the Peer Support program, the committee has learned the following:

1. An emphasis on wellness, as opposed to illness, is important to employees and is an important element in REACH.
2. Voluntary participation through self or joint referral is more acceptable than mandatory participation.
3. People need or seek help for a variety of problems, not just those related to drugs and alcohol.

4. People cope with problems in a variety of ways and need a variety of strategies or resources to choose from.
5. Support for the family is important as family problems affect employees.
6. People care about their co-workers. Therefore, employee involvement will help make a program successful.
7. Confidentiality is mandatory.
8. Special arrangements may need to be made with benefit carriers to provide rebates for treatment. Check out coverage, recognition and support for employee assistance programs when selecting a carrier.
9. Support of top administration is essential.
10. Monetary support is critical.
11. Advertising is needed on a continuing basis to provide information to potential clientele.
12. Keeping in touch with others in the field is important.
13. On-going evaluation is essential.

The Honourable Jake Epp (Minister of National Health and Welfare) states . . . “there is strong evidence that people who have social support are healthier than those that do not.” The commitment of Red Deer College to its employees, by offering programs promoting wellness and support, has recently been recognized by the National Council of Staff Program and Organizational Development. The college was one of two chosen from 1600 in North America to receive the Council’s award for outstanding staff development programs. Red Deer College is indeed exemplary in its demonstrated commitment to “Achieving Health for All.”

References

- Carr, R. & Saunders, G. (1980). *Peer Counselling Starter Kit*. University of Victoria, Victoria, B.C.
- Epp, J. (1986). *Achieving health for all: A framework for health promotion*. Ottawa: Health and Welfare Canada.
- Hills, M. (1987). The discovery of personal meaning: A goal for counsellor training. *Counselor Education and Supervision*. 27, 37-43.
- Hills, M. (in press). *The power of peers: enhancing working relationships*.

About the Author

Marcia Hills, Ph.D. is an Assistance Professor in the School of Child Care at the University of Victoria.

Address correspondence to: Marcia Hills, School of Child Care, University of Victoria, P.O. Box 1700, Victoria, B.C., V8W 2Y2.