

MENTAL HEALTH

Lending a friendly ear goes a long way

A personal view on the importance of reaching out – and listening – to employees struggling with addiction, mental health issues

By Allan Kehler

Addictions remain a serious problem that many individuals struggle with, and the workplace feels the effects of this with lower productivity, attendance and team morale.

Two-thirds (67 per cent) of HR professionals consider substance abuse and addiction to be one of the most serious issues they face in the workplace, according to a 2007 survey of 300 American professionals by Hazelden.

However, only 22 per cent of those professionals felt their company openly and proactively dealt with these issues.

Do you feel you can effectively recognize and manage these issues in the workplace?

What is the first image that comes to your mind when you think about an addict? Many people envision a person staggering down a back alley with a bottle in hand or a needle protruding from her arm.

However, 77 per cent of drug addicts and 90 per cent of alcoholics are employed, according to 2004 figures from the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse.

The addicts of today include nurses, lawyers, surgeons, teenagers, soccer moms and grandmothers. And while the face of addictions has changed over the past 50 years, the challenges remain the same. HR professionals continue to face the challenge of getting employees to acknowledge or talk about their issues around substance abuse or addictions.

Unfortunately, the issue of addictions continues to be soaked with stigma. Employees are embarrassed to speak out because they fear they will be labelled as weak or unreliable or it will prevent them from receiving future promotions.

We need to remember that just as a person does not choose to have depression or schizophrenia, nobody

chooses to become an addict. While writing in my Grade 12 yearbook beside the question “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I certainly did not write “an addict.”

As I visit various companies, I find the focus from HR is typically directed toward individuals who are personally challenged with substance abuse issues. But what about the employees who have a loved one struggling with addictions?

One-quarter (26 per cent) of employees had substance abuse or addiction issues in their families, according to the Hazelden study. Of these, nearly one-half reported being distracted and less productive in the workplace as a direct result of this.

It is important to realize someone who has a loved one struggling with an addiction will often display many of the same signs in the workplace as someone who has an addiction himself.

How HR can help

I encounter countless people who have great intentions to assist people who are struggling with addictions, but fail to understand how to do so. The reality is nobody can address something they do not understand.

Information is power and a deeper understanding provides individuals with the opportunity to make informed decisions.

The workplace can be a safe and supportive environment that encourages individuals to acknowledge their challenges and find their voices to move forward in a healthy way. It is imperative for people to understand their feelings are valid and common and there are resources in society that can help.

A proactive approach from the workplace will allow people to step out from the shadows of shame and embarrassment.

Growing up, I was fortunate enough to excel in many areas. I was

elected student president, athlete of the year and I received numerous academic awards.

However, my world changed in grade 11 as I began to struggle with mental health issues and substance abuse. Teachers observed many changes and took notice as I failed to use my potential.

Sadly, I graduated without a single teacher approaching me directly. Like other individuals in a similar situation, the message I received was they did not care. Now, I know they did care — they simply did not possess the tools to know how to approach me.

It was a university professor, Ian McNeil, who had the tools. He approached me after one of his classes and gently asked me to stop by his office later that afternoon. When I approached his office, his door was wide open. He pointed to an empty chair, gesturing for me to take a seat. With sincerity he asked, “How are you doing today, Allan?”

Every day, people ask us how we are doing and, like robots, we automatically respond with “good.” However, McNeil’s approach was slightly different. He added the word “today” — which brought me to the present — and he added my name to make it personal. My professor had compassionate eyes and expressed genuine concern as he leaned forward, ready to listen.

We all possess a basic need to be seen and heard. His one line met both of these basic needs. I opened my mouth and I began to talk about what was really going on in my life. There was no novel or elaborate theory to his approach.

What McNeil provided me with was an invitation, an empty seat, compassion and a space free from judgment.

He made it clear he was not a counsellor, but he could listen. The more I talked, the more I was able to release my darkness and, in turn, there was

more room for light.

Before I left, he provided me with some resources and he made sure I knew his door always remained open.

Every employee and employer can benefit from these invitations, and it does not have to take place in an office setting.

Another non-invasive approach when someone is struggling is to gently say, “I don’t mean to pry but I just wanted to let you know I am concerned. I wanted to let you know that if you ever needed to talk, I would be happy to listen.”

It is critical to remember if an individual does eventually approach you with her challenges, you should drop what you are doing and listen. The person took one courageous step forward and a failure to listen will likely cause her to take two steps backwards.

Many people in our society point to alcohol, marijuana or cocaine as the problem. Actor Russel Brand may have said it best: “Drugs and alcohol are not my problem. Reality is my problem. Drugs and alcohol are my solution.”

As an addict, I was never afraid of death. Rather, I was afraid of life. I did not know how to live and I certainly did not know how to feel. What if we taught people how to live as opposed to merely exist? What would that look like?

Silence will always be the enemy of recovery. As long as people feel like they can’t use their voice, they will not be able to truly live. A proactive approach towards the issues of mental illness and addictions can change a person’s life. It certainly changed mine.

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