Counseling at Workplace: An Emerging Human Resource Management Practice

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Abstract: Employees are the strongest pillars of any organization. They can play an effective role in building any organization. However, sometimes antagonistic views, alleged reluctance, and angry protestations of the workers / employees may lead to the destruction of the whole infrastructure of any organization. There are no doubt many reasons of workers of not being able to perform up to the mark on personal, social, psychological, professional and interpersonal grounds. However, immediate and consistent counseling, guidance and mentoring can attract the anticipated attention of the employees. The present study throws lights on the concept, importance and the theoretical framework of counseling. It is an axiomatic truth that workers, if interested and motivated well, can bring forth prosperity and integrity in any organization. And, counseling is the very effective tool to invoke interest and motivation among employees.
[Hassan Danial Aslam, Muhammad Badar Habib, Syed Usman Ali Gillani, Anum Siddique, Mehrdad Jalalian. **Counseling at Workplace: An emerging Human Resource Management Practice**. Journal of American Science 2012;8(2):650-654]. (ISSN: 1545-1003). http://www.americanscience.org.

Keywords: Workplace Counseling; Human Resource Management

1. Introduction

Everybody in life encounters problems and some of the problems are complicated enough to be understood. We require help to solve these problems which, either enhance our understanding or lend helping hand to adopt the right strategy. The person who provides such help is called counselor and this process is called counseling. Most of the writers quite often present similar concept of counseling. For instance, Burnard (2002) defines that counseling is the means by which a person helps another person through purposeful conversation. This purposeful communication plays its vital role when someone in trouble "invites and allows another person" to help and solve the problems (McLeod (2007). Both Burnard and Macleod have elaborated the concept of counseling by focusing more on its purpose. A group of experts (Hopson, 1984, Reddy, 1987, and Milne, 1988) has viewed counseling as a technique and skill to help people manage their problems. It is obvious from the views that counseling is a non directive process that facilitates face to face meetings between client and counselor. The only purpose of the meeting is to discuss the problems and difficulties of client in identification of various solutions (IPD Guide, 1997). The process of counseling involves counselor's struggle to see things from the other person's point of view and as a first step to listen carefully what the client has said and the way things are said. Later, counselor does not impose solution or criticize or manipulate the person's viewpoint, but

it's more about understanding his feelings and proposing appropriate approach for solution (Megranahan, 2000).

2. Counseling at Work

There are various types of counseling such as Personal Counseling, Couple Counseling, Family Counseling and Workplace Counseling. Among these types, workplace counseling holds prime importance for the employees in any organization. Workplace counseling or Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) intends to support working staff to provide help on the work related problems faced by the workers, managers, administrators and employers. Counseling at workplace now seems to be an emerging field. Workplace counseling seems to play vital role in solving the workplace problems. The problems may be related to oneself, or they may be associated with some colleagues, managers or employers. These problems generate negative feelings in the workers in the form of anger, tension, sickness, stress or self put-down. Such individualistic problems generally lead to slow down the organizational productivity which is considered a bad sign for any business management organizations. Business field is the common place where people are the most important asset and their satisfactory working can lead the organization towards success (Reddy, 1987). Human resource performance in organizations can be enhanced by various ways like training and development, coaching, mentoring and

also by counseling which can play an important role in the continuous development and professional **3.** growth.

According to Stone (1999) counseling can be ongoing development process for the employee development. She further emphasizes that counseling is non punitive process in which important step is one-to-one meeting with problem producing employee and sensitize him about the difference between his actual performance and expected performance. It means the ultimate purpose of counseling at work place is to minimize the gap between the actual and expected performance. However, it grasps some other functions too as mentioned by Summerfield and Oudshoorn (1995) that it develops better interpersonal relationship and gives advice on legal, financial, and medical grounds.

Yeager (1983) explains the distinction between workplace counseling and traditional therapeutic counseling. He describes that the criteria of workplace counseling should focus on 'performance and productivity' where the main duty of the counselor is to get client ready for work and fix the performance problems. McLeod (2003) on the other hand considers workplace counseling as the provision of brief psychological therapy for employees. Counselor, he further explains, attempts to "alleviate distress within a reasonably short period of time". However, McLeod does not seem convincing as dealing with the disorders and increasing the productivity are two different targets. At workplace the main focus is to increase productivity. Therefore, in IPD Guide (1997) it is argued that the word counseling is unsuitable for workplace context and 'employee assistance' is more appropriate word. Counseling appears to relate more about sickness or problem resolution but workplace counseling is a 'sign of corporate health and encouragement of people to confront and solve problems rather than hiding and denying them.

Board (1983) grouped people problems at workplace in three categories. First is personality problems, they are the type of people who are worried and depressed due to lack of confidence. Second category can be grouped into organizational problems caused by authority issues, overwork, under work, technical incompetence, uncertain future and many more. Last category revolves round the personal problems; for instance, problems related to family and children. These are not technical problems but they are purely humanistic which needs a little care and counseling as compared to the earlier discussed notion called 'assistance', which leads to make people talk about their feelings, their problems and then help them in order to find their solution dimensions.

Importance of workplace counseling in organization

Organizations in 21st century are establishing counseling services for a number of important reasons. One important reason is to cope with the aspect and effects of change. Change of any type has never been easy to accept whether it is technological or of leadership. Organizations seem to spend some significant resources on changing the systems; but often fail due to the resistance done in response to that change. Employers seem reluctant as they find it difficult and time consuming. This leads them to lose interest which ultimately creates performance problems. However, if this change is embedded with proper sensitization and counseling then it can work. Carroll (1996) rightly emphasizes that the employees need support in order to cope with change and overcome the different dilemmas carried through the process of change.

Counseling can itself act as an agent of organizational change. It can open a new window of possibilities that can lead to a higher performance. Hayes (1996) identifies that organizations hardly calculate financial and productivity loss caused by psychological and social problems of their employees which can be resolved by counseling. For instance, conflicts and bad relations between team members and leader, alcohol addict worker or stressed manager and many such problems when accounted at large workforce level would cost immeasurable loss. This loss can be reduced by applying counseling service as part of performance management systems.

Talking about the role of counseling in performance management, Randall (1984) emphasized that manager's main duty is to get best from its staff and it can be achieved by knowing about their problems and making them aware of their strengths. Counseling helps to gain Knowledge of employers' strengths and weaknesses. Counselor enhances strengths and minimizes the impact of weaknesses on productivity. Board (1983) convincingly concludes that counseling always results in human growth and development. It is a relationship built on mutual trust and integrity; however there may be a fear of becoming totally dependent upon the counselor. Employees should be encouraged to think independently about their problems and think of an appropriate solution. Lastly, counseling according to Harrison (1994) is not only used for crises point but also as a preventive measure for mental illness. Feltham, (1997) does not agree with what Harrison has concluded. He is of the view that counselors always help employees in their organizational setting to prevent mental illness.

4.   Applications of Counseling at Workplace

Literature suggests (Megranaham 2000, Burnard 2002, McLeod 2007)) a number of personal as well as work related issues which need either guidance or counseling. Some important areas which need immediate counseling are briefly discussed here.

Stress Counseling

Stress appears to be a common problem that we all feel at workplace whether it is about the achievement of targets, challenges, performing day to day tasks, meeting deadlines or any other stress type. Various sources of stress can lead employee to performance or motivational problems. Sidnev & Phillips (1991) are convinced that poor job description creates role conflict. They assert that on many levels in organization, people don't have any job description which creates potential for misunderstanding, waste of efforts, and sense of unfairness and general anxiety where employee is always uncertain about his role. Bailley (1993) however, believes bad interpersonal relationship as major cause of stress. Cooper and Kell (1993) argue stressful relationships as second major cause of stress. It is argued that stress generally arises from working with difficult managers, bosses and colleagues. Megranahan (1989) explains that unpredictable manager causes anxiety to employees, where employees waste their time and efforts in pleasing their boss rather than spending time at work.

Another most common type of conflict found in organizations is working relationship among the colleagues. Colleagues having rough attitude may exhaust another colleague with rough behavior. Competitive colleagues can add fatigue and insecurity. There is another type of colleagues who are called friendly colleagues who waste too much time in gossiping. There are some other kinds of colleagues as well who play politics or indulge themselves in blame game or always criticizes colleagues in front of boss to let them down (Sidnev & Phillips, 1991). Carroll (1996) argues that main focus of workplace counseling is stress management. Feltham (1997) suggests that stress problem can be addressed by managers or colleagues as they can be good counselors and communication with them can alleviate stress. Megranahan (1989) emphasizes that managers should dynamically participate in seeking, giving and receiving information through different channels.

Counseling skill contributes to good communication. It gives knowledge of employee's problems, conflicts, personalities, perceptions and expectations to the counselor. This competitive environment let them know about organizational goals and inform them how their achievement of tasks and goals are associated with their promotion and job stability.   This thing acts as motivator and catalyst for the employee and helps them to identify other people for support and help in order to avoid future stress situation.

Conflict Counseling

Another import counseling area is conflict that arises between one to one, persons to persons, and worker to boss on the performance issues. It is usually said that in positive teamwork conflicts can be creative and healthy but when it is expressed through rumor, gossips or exclusion from team, it can lower the motivation and performance of both team and individuals. Employee who is task oriented Maybe unhappy of punishment and reward culture of his organization. He may get frustrated and fall in the feeling of "doesn't fit". In such situation according to Feltham (1997) and Humphries (1995) better communication between management and counselor enables the counselor to work with employee and clarify the dissatisfactory aspect regarding change and the consequent factors.

Conflicts can be within groups or teams also. Sometimes individual doesn't get fit in group settings because of age conflict, and working styles problems. Campbell et al (1991) asserts that in this type of conflict both parties seek non-judgmental or neutral person to discuss and express their problem in detail. When counselor asks the questions about different issues of conflicts it often helps counselor and client to discuss similarities and differences between beliefs, behaviors and explores alternative ways of doing things. Counselor can hold individual sessions and later joint session with both parties to discuss the problem in a positive way. Usually, working with both parties leads to better and quicker solution. In any case counselor should not impose decisions but his duty is to explore the conflict and develop some understanding and realization of what is to be achieved and what can be tolerated (Feltham, 1997).

Bullying

Bullying is the term used when a person uses his power or authority in an improper way in order to affect someone adversely. Leymann (1996) explains characteristics of bullies that include shouting at staff, persistently insulting the employees, give offensive remarks, threatening employees about dismissal, give unachievable targets or deadlines, over domination and taking others' credit, badly rating the employees, creating hurdles in promotion and refusing to allow them to go on training or further development. Zapf and Einarse (2001) further adds that bullying occurs typically when employee is

teased, badgered, and insulted, and when he perceives that he or she has little option to retaliate in kind. It is mostly agreed that bullying leads employees towards lower morale and de-motivation.

The victim will never know when and why she or he would be targeted by his senior. This is one out of the most difficult cases for counselor because it relates to attitudes and behaviors. Normalizing the victim response, can be the first step towards counseling and convincing him why he has been chosen for this behavior. Counselor can encourage victim to keep records of events and try to analyze the situations. In bullying major counseling is needed for the person who is making wrong use of his powers. It can be done through discussing the reasons and their connections with the people, and realizing him that his image and position can be at risk for his behaviors (Feltham, 1997).

Counseling for Accepting Change

Changes in an organization can be positive and negative in their impacts. It does affect the position and job description. It raises different kind of dilemmas within employee thinking and can affect his performance in changed job role. Counseling always plays vital role in managing the change, because through counseling employees are convinced that this change is good for them in all respects. Redman (1995) supports the concept by saying that change can be managed by effective partnership of counselors and management. However, Hayes (1996) put forward a different view that managing change is the issue where managers should acquire the role of counselor. He while advocating the idea explains that it is the management who initiates the change and this is its responsibility to implement the change effectively. Also managers know the basic idea behind various changes and who will fit in which role because it is the manager not the counselor who is observing his employees daily (Megranahan, 1989).

Effective communication through counseling can be the best way of managing change. Managers may create the forum of discussions for their employees and promote open discussions and listen during counseling session on any issue and make employees believe that the discussion will not affect their performance report. Giving time to staff members is major role of the manager and the principle of counseling.

Redundancy and retirement are also linked with the problem of accepting change. Redundancy is itself a bad news, which should be given by manager using counseling skills or through counselor, respecting employee feelings, help finding alternatives and explaining the circumstances of redundancy. Another issue of most importance can be

of retirement; where counseling plays an important role. People have difficulties before retirement because of their fear of having no work after retirement. These fears affect badly on the employee performance during work period. Counseling can be beneficial in helping these individuals in order to manage problems and come on terms with the change in which they are involved.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, counseling can be proved a very fruitful activity in order to enhance the workers performance and competencies. Many times workers pass through different sorts of personal, professional or social problems. It is the job of the employers and administration to facilitate them, and motivate them to come out of their problems in an efficient way. For this purpose, proper guidance and professional counseling can help employees a lot in eradicating their problems. However, counseling should be done with the workers' consents while not deteriorating their prestige and self-respect. There is also a great need to make employees adaptable, flexible and accommodative in every sense. They should always be ready to bring innovation by themselves as well as accept other's novelty at their work place. This aptitude will not only be beneficial for their professional growth but for the progress of the organization as well.

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2/2/2012