

# EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

Special Workplace Culture Issue!

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supporting EA professionals

## The Impact of Behavior on Workplace Culture

By Empathia, Inc.

Culture, the foundation of any workplace, is made up of individual behaviors. Culture evolves over time as people in an organization change. Culture sets expectations for which behaviors are either reinforced or extinguished. Employee attitudes and beliefs are shaped by experiences. For culture to change, new, more powerful experiences need to occur to shift the attitudes and beliefs and drive new behaviors.

### Systems Affect Individuals

Many workplace programs and benefits, including EAPs, are sometimes too focused on the individual and fail to consider the broader cultural context. Focusing on individual issues like health behaviors and individual performance without considering the larger cultural forces that drive problem behaviors limits an organization's ability to achieve desired outcomes.

### Behavior is Central to Culture

As an EA professional, imagine you are called for a consultation with a team of leaders. A new manager

has expressed concern about the level of toxicity in her workgroup. She has observed a high degree of discontent among employees and contractors. As soon as someone leaves the room, the group starts talking negatively about that person. Throughout the years a culture of negativity and criticism has developed and complaining is the norm. During your consultation, you discover the last two generations of leaders not only tolerated this behavior, but modeled it. The rules of engagement were clear — in order to fit in, you complain, gossip, and backstab.

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Or, you may find the opposite — a workplace where people are exceedingly friendly and helpful. In leading workplaces like these, one consistently observes leaders and employees at all levels dropping everything to escort a lost visitor to their destination or listening to someone who is having a difficult day.

These business leaders make good eye contact, use open body language, and demonstrate active listening and empathy. They are authentic and value their ability to help others. They have high levels of morale and productivity, with minimal politics and confusion. The employees love coming to work.

In each of these workplaces, behavior sets the mood. When assessing from a cultural perspective, ask questions like: “*What is it about our work culture that makes this employee think he can behave this way?*” and “*What role have I and others played in supporting and reinforcing these behaviors?*”

### Micro-cultures Are Key

It is often said that people don't quit their companies, they quit their bosses. Generous perks and benefits may help attract talent and corporate culture initiatives may sound good on paper. However, these approaches typically do little to create or transform culture.

The real work culture occurs at a smaller level. Micro-cultures form across organizations based on norms established by individuals and leaders within a given department or team. While some aspects of culture may be found throughout an organization, often there are pockets of discontent or high engagement and productivity.

*It is important for the EA professional to assess which managers are driving positive micro-cultures, and how they are driving them.* Managers who concentrate on alignment, positivity, and progress develop happier workplace cultures. They ensure the job and the individual align well, help employees find meaning in the organization's values, show workers how the company fits into the bigger picture, and cultivate trust and flexibility into policies.

They exude positivity by communicating both personal and team successes, offering timely and positive feedback, maintaining open communication, proving resources and emotional support, and demonstrating gratitude. They build progress by setting clear, measurable, and achievable goals, offering training to master skills, and by respecting individualism.

### Tools for Assessing Workplace Culture

❖ **Listen and observe.** The most powerful tool an EA professional has for assessing workplace culture is

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your ability to listen and observe. What beliefs and attitudes do employees and leaders convey and how do their behaviors align? Do their behaviors support their values?

Ask powerful questions like: “*What would it take to create change?*” and “*What opportunities do you see?*” Reflecting on what you hear and observe is a powerful intervention. This information helps stakeholders achieve the crucial first step of gaining insight.

❖ **Consider emotional intelligence assessment and coaching.** It has been estimated that 60 percent of a leader's effectiveness is based on her or his degree of emotional intelligence. The leader's technical skills and business sense are actually of lesser importance. What opportunities are available for leaders, especially front-line supervisors and mid-level managers to gain emotional intelligence?

The skills involved with identifying and regulating one's emotions help a leader succeed in many

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aspects of his or her job. Help leaders identify their “hot buttons.” Present strategies that show leaders how control their emotional reactions and engage rational thinking to avoid getting emotionally “hijacked.” Teach them how to demonstrate behavioral flexibility when working with others’ emotional reactions and “hot buttons.”

❖ **Hold interviews and focus groups.** When a workgroup struggles and stakeholders are having difficulty pinpointing core problems, offer to conduct individual interviews with all or some members of the group. Interview individuals who are reliable reporters, can see all sides of an issue, and are willing to give candid feedback.

Another option is to facilitate focus groups to elicit strategies for moving the group toward their goals. Keep the group focused on identifying desired behaviors and experiences rather than negative attitudes and perceptions.

❖ **Offer management consultation.** Hold strategic consultations with organizational leaders. Gain an understanding of who has influence within the organizational hierarchy and how you can leverage both formal and informal leaders to role model the behaviors desired in the organization.

❖ **Review assessment data.** Ask to review prior assessment data that organizations have collected from climate, culture, engagement, or health assessments. Data can be useful in designing EAP interventions and customizing programs. When possible, gear organizations toward using tools that are scientifically validated, behaviorally-focused, and produce actionable data.

## Summary

In addition to addressing individual concerns, EAPs are uniquely positioned to help organizations explore systemic issues. We encourage you to courageously explore your own workplace culture. Look at the system, point out the elephants in the room, and find your place of influence in transforming it into a thriving, positive place with highly engaged and deeply satisfied workers. ■

*Empathia has been helping organizations and individuals to be their best for over 35 years. The company began in 1982 as an internal employee assistance program (EAP) for a regional medical center and now provides highly customized and successful behavioral health and crisis management programs to companies across the globe. For more information, visit [www.empathia.com](http://www.empathia.com).*



## Editor's Notebook

Employee assistance professionals get called in to help with a lot of *individual* workplace problems, but work issues are sometimes more complicated than just getting a certain employee – we’ll call him “Jake” – to “straighten out.”

One supervisor says Jake’s work is subpar. Another colleague points out that Jake shows up for work on time every day, while a third co-worker notes that he always gets his work done when it’s supposed to be completed. What gives? Is Jake a poor performer who needs referral to the EAP? Or is something else going on? I’ve been in Jake’s shoes, and so I feel it important to share that culture *can be* an overlooked factor in workplace problems.

“Many workplace programs and benefits, including EAPs, are sometimes too focused on the individual and fail to consider the broader cultural context,” writes Empathia, Inc. in this month’s cover story. “Focusing on individual issues like health behaviors and individual performance without considering the larger cultural forces that drive problem behaviors limits an organization’s ability to achieve desired outcomes.”

Workplace culture is the focus of a number of articles in this issue of *EAR*. In addition to Empathia’s excellent article, *which includes important tools for the EAP in assessing workplace culture* – additional stories examine various aspects of this topic under the header, “Workplace Culture Report.” I also address the issue in this month’s *Lifestyle Tips* insert. This month’s *Brown Bagger* is also loosely related to this subject matter.

I hope you’re having a great summer. Until next month.

*Mike Jacquart*

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# Identifying a Toxic Workplace

Just what is a “toxic workplace”? Researchers from the University of Northern British Columbia tried to narrow it down by stating that “an organization can be considered toxic if it is ineffective as well as destructive to its employees”. This means it’s detrimental to the business bottom line as well as employees’ well-being.

## The Case of Amnesty

Even some of the world’s leading organizations have been found to be toxic. For Amnesty International, a champion of human rights issues, leaders of all ranks were allegedly perpetuating a highly stressful environment. Following two employee suicides in 2018, five senior leaders took responsibility and resigned after a damning independent report called Amnesty’s work environment “toxic”.

Signs of a toxic work environment include:

- Staff don’t feel valued, protected, or treated with respect and dignity;
- Rampant discrimination and harassment;
- Leaders using bullying and public humiliation as management tools;
- Highly secretive and mistrustful leaders, resulting in an “us versus them” dynamic; and
- A culture of overwork that’s “very isolating”, “where people barely talk to each other”.

The report found that Amnesty’s HR was largely ineffective across the global organization. It included instances where employees and Organizational Development (OD) often failed to play a meaningful role in grievance processes and in managing information since accurate, timely communication was lacking.

## The Case of Google

While Amnesty’s case focused on the leadership side of things, Google’s culture allegedly involved complaints about co-workers harassing and trolling others online. The unrest at Google was supposedly bred through internal employee mailing lists and messaging platforms that were hotbeds for harassment.

## What to Do?

It’s interesting to note that both Amnesty and Google are large organizations, as a recent study by Paychex revealed that companies with 500 or more employees have:

- 70.8% likelihood of having staff spread gossip about each other;
- 70.3% likelihood of having poor communication between departments and workers; and
- 70% likelihood of employees feeling overworked.

One possible explanation for this trend is that as the number of employees increases, the more likely it is for different personalities to clash, the study noted. *This means that, at crucial growth stages business leaders must keep a closer ear to the ground.*

“Unhappy or disengaged employees cost companies billions of dollars each year in lost revenues, settlements and other damages,” Brigette Hyacinth, author and international keynote speaker on leadership and HR, wrote on LinkedIn.

“Once you identify the major problems by gathering information, develop a plan and follow through. It may mean training, moving or simply getting rid of bad bosses who are the root cause of toxicity in the workplace.

“Show employees you care and are committed to improving their workplace environment. Your employees can be your greatest asset, but it all depends on how you treat them,” she concluded. ■

*Additional source: “Human Resources Director.”*

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## Vital Workplace Dynamics – Part I

**W**hile every company wants to be financially successful it shouldn't come at the cost of its employees. Does your team feel dread on Monday? Or are they hyped up about workplace projects and staff interactions? The following are important dynamics to prioritize in any given company.

❖ *Respect the difference between introverts and extroverts.* Each style is equally productive, but it's vital for colleagues to appreciate the differences and for managers to match employees to the right tasks. This may mean leaving an introvert's door closed or not interrupting them when they have their headphones on. It could also mean pairing together duos you know will work cohesively together, even if they aren't energized in the same way.

❖ *Prioritize trust.* Think back on the worst job you ever had. Was it an entry-level gig with a boss who had a supersized ego? Whatever the case, you probably felt unsettled because you didn't value the thought

leadership of those who were leading you. Like any relationship, having trust is essential to progress. When employees don't believe that bosses have their back, they won't follow directions or respect decisions. This is not only bad news for the company, but the physical and psychological health of employees suffer, too.

❖ *Create the opportunity for community.* You don't have to offer free bagels from 9 to 11 a.m. each Wednesday, but people are more likely to stay at a company if they have a sense of community. Strict rules, lack of communal spaces, or an overbearing, micromanaging c-level team can make employees feel anxious or alone in their work. ■

NEXT MONTH: More strategies are presented.

*Sources: "Ladders"; Dr. Chandler S. Chang, a clinical psychologist and founder of The Therapy Lab; and Dr. Judy Ho, clinical and forensic neuropsychologist and author.*

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### Quick Ideas

## Effective Conflict Resolvers...

... **Understand the individual's needs.** Does the person need to vent? Brainstorm solutions? Be coached? Effective conflict resolvers understand what a person needs by asking questions: "*What are you hoping I will do?*" "*What do you see as my role in this matter?*"

... **Engage in collaborative listening.** Collaborative listening takes active listening one step further by supporting the work of the other person. The speaker's job is to clearly express his or her thoughts, feelings and goals. Effective conflict resolvers facilitate clarity, make the individual feel heard, and ask questions that probe for deeper understanding: "*When you said x, what did you mean?*" "*If y happens, what's significant about that for you?*"

... **Are good communicators.** They pick up on positive messages to spur progress. They paraphrase accurately so words aren't distorted. They ask the listener if this is new information, and if it changes his/her stance.

... **Are optimistic and resilient.** They agree to participate in a negotiation as an act of courage and hope. They inspire by being optimistic, resilient, and they don't let arguments end prematurely – settling for anything just to bring them to a conclusion. ■

*Source: Dina Beach Lynch, former ombudsman for Fleet Bank.*

# Empathy Takes Time, but it Pays Off

**B**irthday cakes, gift cards, free lunches, snacks, movie tickets, and other perks are generously bestowed on employees to celebrate life's happy moments. But what about when times are tough? What then? Life's darker moments present a great opportunity to demonstrate a genuine and caring workplace culture, one which fosters empathy and camaraderie.

Appreciation for employees is best demonstrated as an act of kindness in moments that really matter, like the loss of a family member. Acknowledging that someone great is gone, instead of ignoring the uncomfortable aspects of grief, is a valuable way to embed empathy into a workplace culture.

Recently, while working with a mid-sized (500+ employees) tech company, an executive said he sent an employee a T-shirt and card after a miscarriage. It turns out that the employee he was referring to had been with the company for more than five years, so it's safe to assume that she already had a couple of company T-shirts prior to getting one as a get well gift.

Even in the largest and most notable companies where a variety of employee amenities and benefits are offered, the concept and practice of empathy is often neglected. Perhaps you haven't come across an example of extreme indifference, but you may have

participated in signing a generic condolences card or chipping in for some flowers.

*So why aren't people more empathetic at work?*

- Demonstrating empathy takes time and effort to show awareness and understanding.
- It's not always easy to understand why an employee thinks or feels the way they do about a situation.
- It means putting others ahead of yourself, which can be a challenge in today's competitive workplace.

And yet, empathy is one of the key traits that distinguishes average to mediocre business leaders from outstanding ones.

Spending more time learning about the needs of their employees is time well spent. When writing about empathy, consider the famous quote from Theodore Roosevelt:

*"Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care."*

This is a truth that has stood the test of time. It is true for relationships both out of and *in* the workplace. ■

*Sources: Tamar Lucien, CEO of Mental Happy; and motivational speaker DeLores Pressley.*

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## In the News

# EAPA Updates Bibliography

**T**he Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA) has published the 2019 update of its comprehensive Annotated Bibliography of EAP Statistics and Research Articles. The bibliography, which includes hundreds of EAP-related research articles published in the U.S. and other countries from 2000 through June 2019, is a unique EAPA members only benefit (*requires login*).

Articles in the bibliography address EAP return-on-investment studies, program effectiveness

research and other important topics. A brief summary of each article is included in the bibliography, along with the publication reference.

EA professionals, HR decision-makers, benefits brokers, PhD students and others will find the bibliography to be a valuable resource in making evidence-based decisions affecting the future of individual programs and even the profession. Learn more at <http://www.eapassn.org/EAPresearch>. ■

# Understanding the Weight of Words – Part II

By Jennifer Powers

In today's politically correct climate, most of us are aware that watching one's words is important. But did you know you can create a positive shift in your business or professional career with words?

Your words have a direct influence over your results. *All...the....time.*

You may already know this. Yet, it's possible that you rarely give enough attention or credit to the effects that words can have on a typical workday. Think about it like this:

## Eradicate and replace

Take stock. Examine the words you use to describe the status of your business? Or take a good look at the clients you are attracting into your practice (or not attracting) and consider how your words may have played a part.

Next, commit to eradicating those non-productive words from your vocabulary and choosing words that you will use in their place. For example, maybe you notice that you respond to the question "How's business?" with words like "Slow" or "Not like it used to be". Doing so will just create more of that reality for yourself. Consider replacing those responses with words like "Pretty good, thanks!" or "Getting better every day". Watch what happens.

## Watch your tone

Studies show that only 7% of any spoken message is conveyed through actual words, 38% is through certain vocal elements, and 55% through nonverbal elements (facial expressions, gestures, posture, etc). In fact, *phone* communications rely 18% on words and **82%** on tone.

Here's a quick exercise to examine the dramatic differences. Try saying the following statements in three different tones: Enthusiastic, Neutral, and Angry

- "I don't know."
- "It's no big deal."
- "You're unbelievable."

You get it. Watch your tone.

## Share the love

As leaders and professionals, you know that the words you say to your colleagues, superiors, and clients can have a tremendous impact. Why not use that to your advantage AND theirs?

There are at least two dozen opportunities each day for to offer others a word of praise, a compliment, congratulations, or a thank you. It's easy, but I am willing to bet that you are not doing it as often as you could.

Taking time to share positive words with the people you work with will LITERALLY change them, change you, and change the dynamic of your relationship. Here is a list of a few things you might say to someone else to share the love:

- *Nice job!*
- *I appreciate you.*
- *You make a difference here.*

If this feels awkward at first, that's natural. But if you can step out of your comfort zone and make the effort, the results will blow you away. The best part is that words are free, accessible, and abundant. Use them to help others be their best and build relationships that grow.

## Summary

In conclusion, using your words to positively affect your life and others' lives is a choice. I challenge you to give it a try and reap the benefits. ■

*Jennifer Powers, MCC is an international speaker, executive coach, author of the best-selling book "Oh, shift!," and host of the fun and binge-worthy "Oh, shift!" podcast. For more information, visit [www.ohshift.com](http://www.ohshift.com).*

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# Determining the Benefits of Workplace Coaching

Who wouldn't want a coach to help with achieving health goals? According to a Sanofi Canada health-care survey, health coaching is a popular idea: 61 percent of plan members expressed interest in coaching around personal health goals.

But is health coaching a worthy investment for employers to include as a benefit for their workers?

While coaches can deliver their services in a variety of ways, Jennifer Elia, assistant vice-president of integrated health solutions at Sun Life Assurance Co. of Canada, says health coaching by phone makes sense for large, complex companies where having on-site visits isn't always cost- or time-effective.

"But for some employers, if . . . all employees are co-located under one roof, then there's an opportunity to have on-site health coaching. It's more cost-effective with a mid-size company, and there are great organizations that offer these services that we can recommend," Elia told Benefits Canada.

The costs of health-coaching services vary widely, according to Alex Boucher, principal and practice

leader for total health management at Mercer. Boucher says that in some cases, health coaching comes bundled as part of a wellness platform and can range from a few dollars per month per employee to hourly rates involving experts. ■



## Quick Ideas

# Tips for Better Utilizing Your EAP

Many employers would be amazed at the hidden treasures of EAPs and the wonders that they can do for staff well-being, morale and productivity. Your EAP should be at the very heart of their operation, the lifeblood keeping it thriving and developing. Here are a few suggestions.

❖ **Look for telltale signs and make management referrals.** Be proactive – manager referral is *one* of the key tools of an EAP. A line manager notices that a staff member needs support and takes the initiative with early intervention. He or she flags the concern to HR, and then HR formally refers the team member to the EAP instead of waiting for them to call for help.

Examples could include work that is unexpectedly slipping, individuals going back to smoking after giving up, snapping at people, or becoming withdrawn.

❖ **Remind clients that the EAP is for everyone.** This includes not only employees but also the CEO, directors, and senior management. High-stress atmospheres can be challenging, especially if difficult decisions are on the horizon. I cannot think of a better way for the board to fully appreciate an EAP than when they have personally used the service. ■

*Source: Brian Taylor, "Four tips to make your employee assistance programme work harder," Personnel Today.*