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**PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYEE SERVICES  
WITH LIMITED RESOURCES**

**DIGEST OF REMARKS OF GENIE BLACKHURST**

**BY**

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this article is to help companies and recreation directors develop ideas for their programs. Ashland Chemical supports the mental, social, and physical health of individual employees. Good communication, good leadership and volunteers, who care about the programs, helps to build a stable company.

**INTRODUCTION**

This article is an analysis of the employee services program at Ashland Chemical. This program has evolved under the direction of Genie Blackhurst. Ashland Chemical has employees at 190 locations worldwide. At Ashland Chemical in the Dublin headquarters, there are 1,100 employees internationally and Ashland has internationally 4,500 employees in the corporation. The primary purpose of the employee services program is to improve the mental, social, and physical health of the employees. Genie Blackhurst is the only professional employee services staff member at Ashland Chemical and is located in Columbus, Ohio. The success of the program is the direct result of leadership and

ability to develop resources when staff is limited.

The primary problem in the development of an employee services program is deciding the nature of the program. Each organization has its own personality and must, in essence, answer this question: what is the nature of an employee services program? At Ashland Chemical it is a wholistic approach in regard to the emotional and physical health of the individual. The purpose of the Ashland Chemical program is to impact employees in balancing their work and family life and support their social, mental, and physical health. The basic philosophical premise behind this approach is that one area interacts with the other to have a wholistic impact upon the individual which ultimately effects their work and their productivity.

A primary role of an employee services director may be that of a counselor. Counseling, in this context, is the ability to listen in a confidential atmosphere and help the individual find the necessary resources to solve life's problems. This type of counseling is a behavioral modification process that assists the individual in making life decisions. This is a pressure valve within the organization that allows the

individual to have a place to go where the problems do not become dysfunctional for the organization. If an individual's problems are beyond the scope of listening and the resources cannot be found, Ashland Chemical has a system in which the employee can seek professional counseling through their Employee Assistance Program. The employee service director is in a good position to act as a counselor because the activities of the program are the vehicles to help identify problems or develop the necessary skills to help assist individuals overcome their problems. The primary element that makes this type of counseling process work within the employee service department is the Director being able to establish trust. The individual knows none of the information will be used by management to make decisions about productivity or their employment status.

## PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

There are three basic types of programs at Ashland Chemical:

1. Those that are developed and organized by the program staff and volunteers;
2. Those types of programs that are referrals and brought inside by an outside person or that are out-sourced; and
3. Where the employees act as an agent in programs outside the company.

Some of the programs that are organized inside the company by the program staff or volunteers are through the Ashland Chemical Recreation Association (ACRA). The ACRA is company sponsored and there is no fee to belong. The company will support almost any activity in which employees are interested up to \$60 per

activity per employee per year. The ACRA is structured with a 12 member peer panel or counsel to which employees can bring new ideas in order to gain approval for sponsorship by the company. The decision-making body is elected each year from the employees. They are the basic administrative unit of the employee association. There is a tremendous diversity of programs that reflect the employees' interest. Some of the recreation programs are: darts, horseshoes, table tennis, racquetball, aerobics, basketball, weight lifting, euchre tournaments, holiday parties for children and family, Wonderland at the zoo, softball and bowling.

The Fitness Center is one of the most important components of the employee services program. Each employee, before he/she participates in this program has to enroll in Fitness 101. Health is a primary emphasis in the program because it develops a very tangible and recognizable benefit to both the company and the individual. Many of the support programs that are offered by the company are therefore health related. Some of the programs are: The Health Fair, health screening, and educational classes.

Another category of programs is health programs where expertise is brought into the company. Some of these screenings are: mammogram, prostate cancer, cholesterol, fat, lung capacity, podiatry, vision, glaucoma, and diabetes. Most of these in-source programs are for health promotion. Some other programs that are mental health based are: parenting classes, counseling, elder care referral, and child care referral. The primary nature of these programs, whether health or nonhealth based, is support for the employees and their families. The purpose is to develop a support network to deal with issues that may directly influence an employee his/her family. The

basic ideas behind this type of in-sourcing is that they are provided with a minimal cost to the company and it is an expertise that some companies cannot afford except on a short-term basis. The other aspect is that if it is not provided especially on work site, the company and the individual may not have a format or a forum in terms of time constraint and other barriers for the development of understanding of these topics. These types of programs are essential to the mental and physical well-being of the employee. These programs are a direct result of surveys that have been conducted by the company to determine what type of support network is needed by the employee.

Other important types of programs in the company are those that are out-sourced. Three that have already been discussed are child care, counseling, and elder care. These types of programs are provided charge to employees. Activity based programs that are out-sourced are with the YMCA in the Corporate Challenge and the May Classic for the Lung Association.

Another important part of employee programs are those that involve volunteer agencies such as The American Heart Association, The American Cancer Society, The American Red Cross, and The Leukemia Society. An example of this type of interaction is with the Leukemia Society which holds a gelatin slide fund-raiser. The employees mix gelatin in 25-50-gallon drums and put it in a swimming pool. There is a slide built and individuals are able to sponsor someone to use the slide for a donation to The Leukemia Society. These types of programs with public institutions are cooperative. The primary outcome is recognition as a socially responsible company with the development of goodwill toward the community. These events foster

relationships with the community, and strengthen bonds between the public and private sector. The benefit for the individual employee is that they develop a sense of fulfillment by being able to help others. This helps the employee understand his/her relationship to the company and the company's relationship to the community.

## **PROGRAM OPERATIONS**

### **Funding**

Some may find it difficult within a company designed for the viable resources internally to be able to develop programs. It is important to have company support that has a base financial commitment to a Fitness Program. Problems arise when it is time to expand the program. One of the ways to help in the expansion is to schedule activities such as karate or aerobics classes on racquetball courts. The need can then be demonstrated for more space and the employees will provide the necessary support and justification for the expansion. The other part of this particular strategy is that the facilities appear overcrowded. They are. The goal is to have the facility become so popular that it justifies expansion. The new space can then be provided for expansion with employee and company support.

Another way of being creative about the funding process is to find resources within the company that are not being used and demonstrate a better utilization of the resource. These resources may be televisions and VCR's that are not being used by a company's training program but could be more effectively utilized in an employee services program. Another creative way is to get vendors or individuals who want access to the employee population

to provide gifts and door prizes as incentives for attending meetings. Associated with many of these incentive items or door prizes is the idea of coupons. These coupons are provided for the employees and they receive their discount directly from the vendor. This saves the selling of tickets to increase the cost of operation. These coupons provide incentives because the employee can see the direct relationship between the vendor and the company. When the employee-employers see the relationship between the benefits from the program and the cost, the programs can be more easily justified to obtain direct and indirect resources within a company. This will help expand and increase the quality of a program. When employees know that the company does not have resources, they donate much of their time as well as the necessary elements to make a program successful. These types of donations, whether they are in-kind or hard dollars, promote and provide the motivational elements by employees to initially buy into a program.

### **Communication**

One of the problems in an employee services program is marketing it to the employees. To effectively market an employee services program, the company must have the support of top and middle management. Management must be supportive of the programs and allow the employees to participate. Each department must take the responsibility for announcing the importance of upcoming events. If management does not support the program, it is imperative that the company educate them to the benefits of the program to the company as well as the individual. One of the ways in which they can be educated is announcements of planned events. Many

times the management will not react. As a program grows in popularity, it becomes institutionalized. Eventually management will learn the value of the program from the employee and him/her compliments about the program and its impact upon him/her. Even with bulletin boards and newsletters, the problem of such saturation marketing that the employee services is facing is still a difficult problem. Even with the best efforts, many times people still are not aware of programs. It is important to have a committee that is in charge of promotion that puts newsletters on each desk and personally invite people to participate.

Person-to-person communication through the grapevine is the most effective means of building employee attendance. Personal referrals are very important and generate enthusiasm because these individuals understand the relationship between themselves and the program. Because these individuals see this relationship clearly, they help motivate others into action.

An organizational plan has to be put together by those individuals who are involved and are convinced that the program is of quality. These individuals will generate enthusiasm. The word will spread about the quality of the program and its benefits. Individuals in the organization are ambassadors for the program and reach out into the very furthest reaches of the organization.

Another essential element in communication is that of being able to make a difference in people's lives. By providing the necessary leadership skills, leaders help show them the way to solve problems in their lives. Competence and leadership establish respect. This establishes a trust link and gives the program credibility. Credibility is the basis of communication that

attracts additional people to the program. They see the other people and their families benefiting from the program. This exposure translates into positive outcomes for the company.

### **Volunteers**

In a program that has very few professionals, volunteers are the center or the core of the program. It is the professional's job to stimulate, motivate, and channel these volunteers to develop a quality program. The key to a good volunteer program is the leader's ability to be able to motivate volunteers into action. In order to be effective, the leader has to know the people. He/she has to know their strengths and weaknesses and how to motivate them. The key to motivating volunteers is to know their interests, and to relate these interests on an individual as well as a family basis through company programs. The Director of the employee services program must have excellent relationships with people in the company. The ability for the volunteers to make

decisions and see the results of their decisions and the impact that they have is a motivational element. It keeps the volunteers energized in the organization. It has to be their organization. They have to see the impact of the programs upon their lives.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The bottom line for the employee services program is having an impact upon people's lives. It is in the absence of programs that the people and community realize the loss. And individually when employees need the director, they really appreciate his/her presence. The real challenge is people who do not understand what an impact employee services makes in the community where they work and live. The company needs to raise the consciousness and professional level of odds, and expectations as to how individuals will be treated in the work world. This is how government and industries will see what kind of contribution an employee services program is making to society and especially the company.