

THE sand paper

Spring 2008



Viva La Difference

By Dr. Gretchen Stein, President & CEO of The Sand Creek Group

I am so grateful for the people I have the pleasure of working with each day. The staff members of the Sand Creek Group, each in their own way, bring something rich and special to our team and the services we offer our customers and clients.

This quarter's *Sand Paper* highlights some of the unique knowledge held by this team. Glen Bjornson is our in-house chemical health specialist. He is a licensed psychologist additionally credentialed as a Substance Abuse Professional. In the first article, he writes about the impact of chemical abuse on the family and how the family's behavior impacts chemical abuse. If this story seems familiar to you, please take the next step and call for help.

Diane Johnson is a certified employee assistance professional and a licensed social worker with many years of EAP experience coaching supervisors. Two articles in this edition come from her wisdom. The first encourages supervisors to take action in welcoming returning employees back to the workplace, while the second speaks to the importance of managing diversity and developing cultural competency at work.

Behind the scenes sits our newest and youngest team member, Kristin Irwin. Kristin is currently pursuing a master's in school guidance counseling at the University of Minnesota. She plays many roles here and is a wiz at desktop publishing. She gave *The Sand Paper* our most recent face lift and greatly improved its readability.

All of our staff members contribute their expertise in different ways to the collaborative work we do with clients as well as to the *Sand Paper*. Diverse work teams encourage us all to stretch and be better together than we are as individuals. Daily, I celebrate our differences.



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When Caring Isn't Enough:

The Challenges of Living with Another's Chemical Abuse

By Glen Bjornson, MA, LP, BCCR, SAP

His father had to go into the bar to coax him out, and that was no easy task. His mother sat outside in the car. They'd just driven 150 miles to the small college town, sitting quietly much of the time. They were scared to death about what they might find. It had only been a couple months since the incident at the airport. That day they'd spent hours searching for him only to find out later that instead of flying off to who knows where, he'd taken a cab to a local hotel and had holed up there for hours using cocaine

until he became so paranoid he'd had to call them to come rescue him from some hallucinated threat. This time was different, but certainly no less frightening. He'd called them this morning from the local hospital to say he'd cut his wrists the night before but had gotten treatment and was no longer in any danger. His parents, of course, didn't buy that, so they'd driven the 150 miles across the state to see if they could talk some kind of sense into him.

He treated them as if they were intruding, as if they were out of their minds and had no idea what they were talking about. And the truth was, they didn't. They knew they loved him, though they weren't sure they liked him much anymore. He swore at them and told them to leave him alone. They yelled back, argued, and tried everything they could think of to make him change. They knew he was in trouble, but sometimes, the way things happened, they wondered if they

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651-430-3383
1-800-632-7643
www.sandcreekeap.com
info@sandcreekeap.com

When Caring Isn't Enough... (continued from page 1)

weren't the ones who were going crazy. This was their son, their "little boy". What was going on? How had things gone so terribly wrong? "What are we doing?!" they wondered, but they didn't know what else to do...

Over the years they'd threatened and cajoled. They'd cut off the money only to find that he'd written bad checks and would get in *real trouble* if they didn't bail him out. They'd done what *they had to do* to get him out of jail after he'd been arrested for petty theft and possession of a controlled substance. He'd stolen from them, forged their signatures on checks, and they'd looked the other way because *they didn't want to get him into trouble*.

Things didn't start to change until their friend, the attorney they'd twice retained to represent their son, refused to represent him again. The attorney told them that he

believed their son had a problem with alcohol and other drugs and that they were "enabling" their son, or more specifically, enabling the alcohol and other drug problems to continue their assault. He suggested they consider getting involved in Al-Anon because that was the best way they could help their son. He encouraged them to learn as much as they could about Alcoholism and Chemical Dependency and to get some family counseling from someone who understood the disease. He said that bailing their son out of the trouble he was in was the last thing they really needed to do.

When they hung up the phone, they felt abandoned and betrayed. They were shocked and offended by the things that he'd said, but the seed had been planted and things would never be the same again.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of individuals – sons, daughters, fathers, mothers, spouses, partners, co-workers and friends – enter into a life and death struggle with Alcoholism and other drug dependencies or abuse. In most of those cases, well-meaning individuals will try all sorts of things to make things better. The truth is that caring isn't enough sometimes. In fact, caring in ineffective ways can actually hurt more than it helps. It can be incredibly difficult to change the way we respond to someone's chemical abuse, and yet it is often the most essential step. There are many resources to help and support individuals in making these difficult changes.

If someone close to you is having problems with alcohol or other drugs, please call The Sand Creek Group to talk about getting the help you need. □

Return to Work Considerations: Suggestions for Supervisors

By Diane Johnson, MSW, LISW, CEAP

In our last issue of The Sand Paper, we talked about the value of reintegration meetings for the military personnel who are returning to the workplace. We were happy to get responses from other employees who suggested that this topic of reintegration needs to be expanded to include other life events. For example, an employee may be out of work for an extended medical reason such as surgery, chemotherapy, mental health, chemical dependency treatment or the death of a loved one.

One of the things about all of these life events and the time away from work is that when an employee returns, their personal or family world may have changed dramatically. Also, depending on the length of absence or, as in the case of chemotherapy, a long-term intermittent absence, their coworkers or workplace may have appreciably changed. When an individual is returning to work after a significant life experience, regardless of the circumstances, it seems important to utilize the following steps:

1. Build in a "return to work" meeting with the employee on their first day back. During this meeting it will be important to welcome the employee back as well as provide the employee with as much information as possible about how work duties may have changed. It is also helpful to ask about any current or anticipated re-entry challenges so that they can be addressed readily and directly.
2. Ask about what information the person wants shared and whether or not the employee would like you to share this information or if the employee would prefer to talk with coworkers personally. If the returning employee appears to be sharing too much personal information to a point that has a

negative impact on coworkers or the workplace, it is important to meet with the employee and set limits on this behavior.

3. Expect that there may be requests for further FMLA or Reasonable Accommodation and those circumstances will be unique to each person. As much as reasonably possible, while still respecting confidentiality, talk with the work group about any changes (e.g. the person's work schedule) and how the work will still get done.
4. Keep in mind that one element employees report appreciating is being asked about their current status as well as the impact of the life event. Employees have indicated that it helps in feeling valued as a person and not just as a part of the business needs.

Though these are basic steps, they are sometimes skipped because a supervisor is concerned about prying into someone's personal life or may be concerned about how an employee will respond. In this situation, it is important to state the intention of the conversation and make it clear that the goal is to make the transition back to work as smooth as possible for everyone. One employee that we heard from spoke of the need to feel compassion as well as the business agenda when she returned to work. Managing an employee's return to work is also about managing a relationship.

As the returning employee, a coworker or a supervisor, if you have a return to work situation that you would like assistance with, please give EAP a call. □

Differences and the Assumptions that We Make

By Diane Johnson, MSW, LISW, CEAP

Outside the office, two older male employees are talking. An openly gay middle-aged employee is in a discussion with a younger African-American male employee, and three white female employees of varying ages are engaged in conversation. Everyone has worked hard to meet a project deadline, and at this moment employees are enjoying a few minutes break on a beautiful spring day. As we look at these individuals, what assumptions do we make about them and what they are discussing?

What matters the most are our assumptions: what we THINK they are discussing based on identifiable labels. For all of us, assumptions aren't limited to gender and ethnicity but may cover a variety of other identifying labels such as age, disability, sexual orientation or religious beliefs. The danger with assumptions is the leap in our thinking that takes a stereotype and converts it to a fact. This can lead to positive, negative, blatant or subtle expectations about how certain groups or individuals will act or think.

An important individual step in managing diversity in a successful manner is to acknowledge that all of us make assumptions based on stereotypes and we need to be cognizant of when that is occurring. There is also a need to recognize that cultural differences among people do exist. By acknowledging those differences, we also recognize that our own perceptions are not the center of universal experience, nor will we gain the most as a work group by expecting others to conform to our views of a situation. It seems that individuals often express a

desire to be more inclusive in their awareness and perspective, but barriers exist regarding "how to move forward" and expand awareness. Consider these common questions and suggested responses:

1. If I want to be genuinely supportive of employees and colleagues and sensitive to differences, what should I do?

A first step is to not make assumptions and not stereotype. The simplest route to avoiding assumptions is to ask direct questions. For example, if an employee is profoundly deaf, it is important to know how to get that person's attention. Options may include touch, moving within that person's vision or other creative solutions. Each individual who lives with this disability probably has a preference and it makes good sense to ask that person directly.

A second step is to accept individuals as people rather than Asian-Pacific or gay, etc. It is a challenge to value an individual's diverse experience and also not have that be a one-dimensional definition of that person. Again, a critical component is the willingness to suspend assumptions, interact with an individual and ask direct questions to clarify perceived differences or preferences with that person.

2. What if I make a mistake and unintentionally offend someone?

This may easily happen because of the differences. Many times the reaction to a "mistake" will be based on the perceived intention of the person who made the

comment. For example, if a comment is made because of malicious intent vs. a lack of information, the response may be quite different. If confronted regarding an offensive statement, we each have a responsibility to acknowledge the other's feelings, ask for information regarding what would be preferable and attempt to change our behavior.

3. I've got work to do; how can I take the time to understand differences with coworkers?

This is a legitimate concern. The pace of work may seem to prohibit consideration of differences. As research continues to demonstrate, however, management literally cannot afford to operate based on an assumption of homogenous perceptions, learning styles and cultural experience. The same is true as coworkers, and an additional layer is the reality that the more accurately we communicate with each other and understand our differences upfront, the less time we have to put into trying to correct a miscommunication or conflict.

Cultural competency is not a static goal or a state of being at which point any of us can claim "I am now culturally competent." Rather, it is an ongoing process of continued growth and development where no one is advantaged or disadvantaged but where we all are in a perpetual learning curve. The Sand Creek Group is a resource for any employee or organization who is wanting help in moving toward an increased awareness of managing differences. □



Made in Italy

Gretchen Stein, CEO of The Sand Creek Group, had three of her paintings accepted for the *Made in Italy: Art and the Il Chioistro Experience 1995 – 2007* exhibit at the Broome Street Gallery in New York City, which ran from March 11 – 23, 2008. This was a juried exhibit where 80 images were selected from 300 submitted paintings, photographs, collages, drawings and sculptures done during *Il Chioistro* workshops in Italy. Congratulations Gretchen!

"Grapevine Dance Line" - Painted *alla prima en plein aire*, Tuscany, Italy 2007.
More of Gretchen's paintings are online at www.gretchenstein.com.



Dear Sandy,

I am struggling to not say something to my coworker who sits next to me. She is volunteering for one of the presidential candidates, and it is all that she talks about. That wouldn't be so bad, but she assumes that I share her political beliefs and has been so disparaging of the other candidate that now it seems awkward to tell her that's who I support. It's a long time until November, and I don't know how to endure her political fervor!

-Pushed to the Limit

Dear Pushed to the Limit,

Politics in the workplace is a great example of a diversity issue that isn't necessarily tuned in to. There are the differences of gender, race and sexual orientation that the workplace has developed norms, expectations and policies about that clearly promote respect and

discourage derogatory comments about differences. As we know, political beliefs can also be highly personal, and comments, jokes and judgments can be hurtful and perceived as disrespectful.

I want to suggest that you do not need to endure until November and that you have a couple of options:

1. You can talk with your coworker and let her know that though you appreciate her passion for her candidate, you prefer to not talk politics at work. If she asks you "why", you can let her know that it is your own commitment to not engage in topics that may offend a colleague.
2. If you feel that you cannot talk directly to her, you could speak with your supervisor. If you let your supervisor know that you are

feeling uncomfortable, he or she can remind your team, that during the election, it would be better to avoid discussing specific political candidates due to the potential inflammatory effect it may have on others.

If you are offended, others may be also. In the interest of a workplace that feels safe for everyone's beliefs, it is an important reminder that you are offering your coworker.

-Sandy

Send Sandy your inquiries at info@sandcreekeap.com. We may not be able to publish all inquiries, but all will be responded to via email. Thank you.



SAND CREEK GROUP, LTD.

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610 NORTH MAIN STREET, SUITE 200
STILLWATER, MINNESOTA 55082

(PHONE) 651.430.3383 / 800.632.7643
(FAX) 651.430.9753

WWW.SANDCREEKEAP.COM