
Trauma brought into the workplace

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Abstract

Looks at how we bring the trauma of our childhood into the workplace, considering our "family" at work, and probes more deeply into traits which abused adults carry with them daily. Finally, explores the long-lasting effects with regard to communication patterns in the workplace as they appear in conflict resolution, performance appraisals, relationships with authority figures and co-workers, and suggests what employee assistance programmes can do to help adults who have been abused as children.

Fear was what I knew growing up. I was afraid of coming home, being home, of leaving home, of being away from home. I didn't want to be whoever I was or wherever I was[1].

Introduction

The National Council of Alcoholism says there are 10.5 million alcoholics in the USA[2]; as a result, there are 28 to 34 million adult children of alcoholics. Thus, one in every eight Americans is the child of an alcoholic[3,4]. Adult children of alcoholics comprise one of the largest groups in the world, and research shows that if you came from an alcoholic home, the probability is high that you were physically, emotionally, or sexually abused. Surprisingly, however, many people who were abused as children do not necessarily come from alcoholic homes. Abuse has many forms, and although the incidence of abuse is high in an alcoholic home, you do not have to have come from an alcoholic home to have been abused.

There are many different kinds of abuse: physical abuse involving slapping, hitting, and punching another. Abuse is also the slamming of a person against the wall, to the floor, against the car. Another form of abuse is sexual. Sexual abuse is one of our most ancient social taboos. However, in a survey of 250,000 cases referred to a child sexual assault treatment programme, it was found that one in every three women and one in every seven men had been sexually abused by the time they reached the age of 18 years[1].

Neglect is also a form of abuse common in dysfunctional homes. Neglect is demonstrated by inadequate supervision, such as leaving young children in the care of other children, or leaving them with no supervision at all. It also occurs when children are left unsupervised in the car for hours. Neglect is also inadequate physical care, such as not providing meals or proper clothing and shelter[1].

Finally, there is emotional or mental abuse. Remember the old saying, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me". Child development experts believe that thousands of children are systematically humiliated, intimidated and terrorized by their parents. Many of these children are plagued into adulthood by anger, self-loathing, and feelings of helplessness[5].

This article will look at how we bring the trauma of our childhoods into the workplace.

We will consider our “family” at work, and probe more deeply into traits which abused adults carry with them daily. In addition, we will examine the long-lasting effects with regard to our communication patterns in the workplace as they appear in conflict resolution, performance appraisals, relationships with authority figures and co-workers (see Figure 1), and, finally, suggest what managers with the help of employee assistance programmes (EAP) can do to help adults who have been abused as children.

Parents as managers

Since “family” is the primary grouping to which we are exposed with which and become comfortable as we grow up, we recreate “family” as a grouping at the office. If we grew up in a family where we had positive relationships, we might feel most comfortable working in a company where we could establish similar positive relationships. On the other hand, if our family situation was in some way problematic, we might unconsciously choose a work situation in which conditions are similarly problematic – for example, a rigid structure, a domineering boss, or intense competition[3].

Adults often report similarities in the dynamics and feelings produced by their work relationships compared with the dynamics they experienced as children growing up in an alcoholic or abusive family system, taking on the old roles they played in their family of origin. It is as if the boss really *is* the parent.

Figure 1 The trauma of childhood brought into the workplace



On-the-job relationships may echo elements of old family relationships for many employees (see Figure 2); as a result, historic issues get played out in the workplace just as they do elsewhere[6].

Some of what you learned in your family about work was part of your family’s overall value system. Among other things, your parents have certain beliefs about the quality of work, the nature of work, and the way in which it was undertaken[7].

Some of us have parents who actually meet the work day with interest and enthusiasm. They like what they do and enjoy doing it. Their work is exciting and stimulating, or allows them to do a task or skill that they greatly enjoy. Challenges at work are met with enthusiasm and innovation.

Other parents disparage work, grumbling about the boss or the pay cheque. The work day is met with muttering and complaining and ends the same way. Growing up with this idea of work does not make us see the work world as exciting or stimulating, but rather boring and painful[7].

The kinds of workers our parents are (see Figure 3) have influenced us as adults:

- *the trooper* – the parent who “just keeps plodding along” on the job no matter what;
- *the nine-to-fiver* – the parent who watches the clock and does nothing more than what is expected of him/her;
- *the resenter* – the parent who works hard but resents not only having to do it, but the family which necessitates his/her doing it;
- *the type “A” personality* – the parent who works all the time, takes work home at night, works on Saturdays and Sundays, and is never able to achieve balance in his or her personal life;
- *the unmotivated* – the parent who just cannot seem to get it together to get a job and tries to get money from everybody else, or who constantly loses his or her job;
- *the enjoyer* – parents who enjoy both work and family and are able to find a balance between them[7].

We see many moods and hear both complaints and success stories from our parents regarding work. However, for the most part, our parents probably have one attitude that dominates. When we think about our parents going to work we have a tendency to think of a few select phrases or a feeling that we get about how our parents feel about the

Figure 2 Our “family” at work

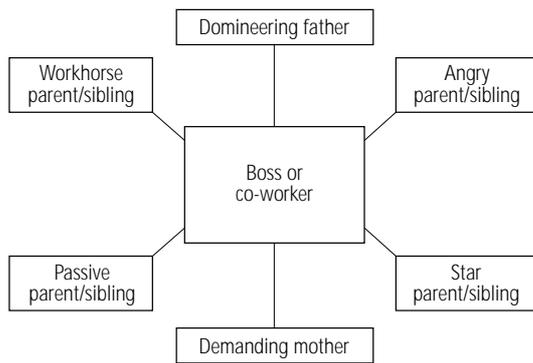
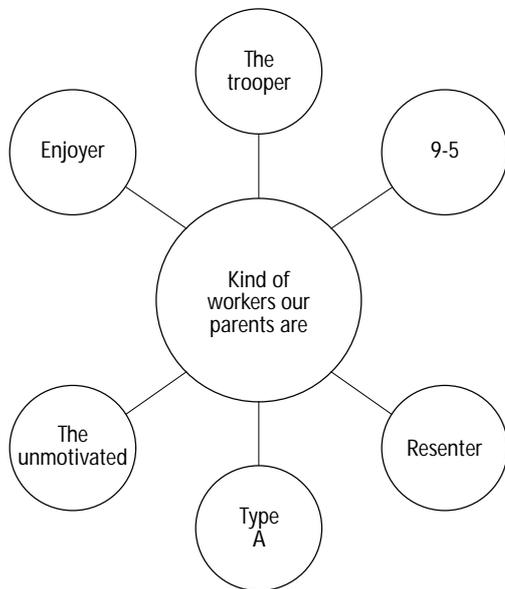


Figure 3 The kinds of workers our parents are



work which they do. These are the attitudes and ideas that we need to examine closely for we may have assimilated those ideas into our own ideas about work and what it means to us.

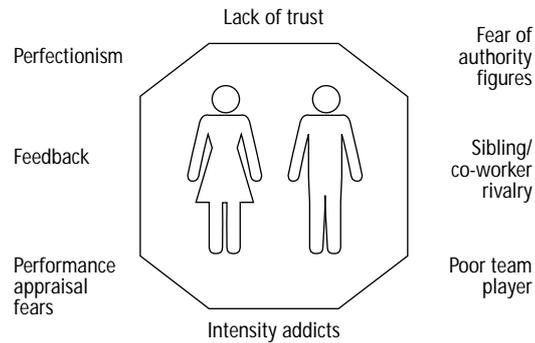
Traits of abused children as adults

A 1982 study by Kemper Insurance Company revealed that 50 per cent of the company’s EAP problems were reducible to certain employee traits, including lack of trust, conflict with authority figures, sibling and co-worker rivalry, poor team players, intensity addiction, performance appraisal anxiety, and perfectionism[6] (see Figure 4).

Lack of trust

Adults abused as children cannot allow themselves to trust the world. The world of their

Figure 4 Traits of abused children as adults



childhood changed too often, too abruptly, and too painfully to engender trust[4]. As part of the fierce self-sufficiency and survivorship traits which these adults abused as children have developed, they learned to trust only themselves. Although being self-reliant is good, developing a balance between independence and interdependence is better. Other people can be trustworthy. Once we begin to trust others, we no longer have to carry the burdens of the world on our own shoulders[1].

Fear of authority figures

Since our first “managers” are our parents, the way in which our parents exercised their authority began to influence us at a very early age. Their authority styles and behaviours often become the way in which we exercise our own authority or power over others. Similarly, when a boss or supervisor uses the same technique to correct us that our parents used, we often end up with the same feelings we had when we were disciplined as children by our own parents[1].

There are four basic ways in which parents typically establish authority by:

- (1) acting like a buddy;
- (2) being abusive;
- (3) being inconsistent;
- (4) being strict.

Each of these styles is a combination of our parents’ personality, feelings about supervision, and the way in which they were parented.

If adults were abused as children, their feelings towards authority figures are ambivalent at best. Anger, fear, the need to protect the self and to anticipate trouble are all present in their mental make-up[8] (see Figure

Figure 5 The feelings towards authority figures of adults who were abused as children

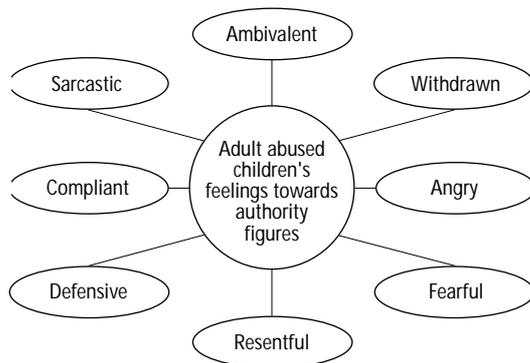
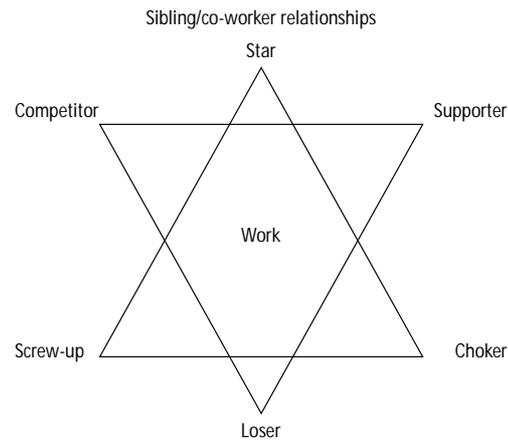


Figure 6 Sibling/co-worker relationships



5). They tend to respond poorly to authoritative management styles, and rather than disagree with their boss, they will try to win the person's approval by doing whatever they are told. Many are unable to present a dissenting point of view, even when it is to the organization's benefit for them to do so[3].

Sibling/co-worker rivalry

The various sibling relationships we experienced in childhood have a profound effect on how we develop relationships in the office. Rather than acting as co-workers should, employees usually relate to one another in the same manner in which they related to their siblings and parents[7].

In addition, how we got along with our siblings is also taken into the workplace. Some of our earliest examples of working together come from childhood play. Many of us developed a style in terms of how we interact with others to get the job done.

There are different kinds of sibling/co-worker relationships (see Figure 6):

- *The competitor* – the competitor needs to beat everyone. This person competes all the time, always trying to be “the best”.
- *The supporter* – the supporter is the person who has a remarkable ability to be positive and supportive of the efforts of others, whether on a team, at play, or at home.
- *The star* – the star is overly conscious of possessing a remarkable talent or gift and is continually looking for opportunities to shine. Stars may be more intent on exposing their excellent abilities than on helping the team to win.
- *The screw-up* – people who play the role of screw-up somehow have the idea that they

can never accomplish a task correctly. Fearing that they will ultimately fail in the task, they sometimes create a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby they, in fact, do fail to accomplish the task correctly.

- *The choker* – people who choke under pressure seem to have a skill under their belt until they are placed in a pressure situation. Performance anxiety is initially caused by parental pressure[7].

Because of these different kinds of relationships, children take on many different roles in the home. The “perfect one” wants to look the best to his/her parents. The “rebel” will not take direction and consistently has authority conflicts. “Mavericks” have their own unconventional way of doing things, and they tend to go their own way without concern for how they appear to their peers. The “baby” is usually the youngest in the family. “Babies” learn to use their inexperience to enlist the aid of others. Adult “babies” are usually very accustomed to having their own way and may exhibit adult versions of temper tantrums when they do not get what they want. The “responsible child” takes care of his/her siblings. As adults on the job, responsible children can always be counted on[7].

Thus, as adults, these individuals repeat the roles they played in their families while growing up. They also carry the interpersonal styles that were present in those families into other social systems[9].

Poor team players

In addition, adults abused as children have difficulty in being team players (see Figure 7). Since they could not trust their parents to

Figure 7 Characteristics of poor team players



follow through on verbal commitments, they find it difficult to trust co-workers to follow through on stated goals of the group[6].

Adults abused as children also have trouble co-operating in a group. They prefer to take on the whole task and control it, or do nothing. This is largely because they cannot trust others to do what they say they will[3]. By developing heightened responsibility for others, particularly if the work environment is unstable or threatening, the need for control interferes with team efforts. Fellow employees become resentful and productivity suffers[6].

Intensity addiction

Another issue which adults who have been abused as children deal with is the addiction to intensity. Unconsciously, the abused adult seems to gravitate towards a stressful work environment. If the environment is not stressful, he or she will create the stress that feels so familiar[6].

In addition, adults abused as children have a tendency towards high-risk affairs in the workplace. These involve getting involved with a married boss. This kind of living on the edge is symptomatic of the person's attraction to excitement, stress and chaos[8].

Performance appraisal anxiety

The way in which we learn to respond to discipline as a child is often the way in which we later respond to discipline as an adult.

Children typically respond in one of four ways by:

- (1) becoming overly apologetic;
- (2) becoming angry;
- (3) remaining untouched by the discipline;

- (4) feeling hurt but yet able to accept the criticism[7].

Adults abused as children manifest problem behaviour in the context of performance appraisals. They are usually hard on themselves, constantly seek validation of worth and acceptance, and may distort the truth to save face. They also deny or reject evidence documenting their poor performance. In an attempt to save face, they create excuses, scapegoats, and other explanatory defenses[2]. They have a high need for approval and validation. Equating job performance with one's own self-worth assigns tremendous power to a supervisor's praise or criticism. To adults abused as children, criticism of work performance is tantamount to criticism of themselves[6].

Perfectionism

Adults abused as children live in constant fear of someone finding out that they are not competent and with the sense of being a "fraud" (see Figure 8). This leads to perfectionism, workaholism and overcommitment[6]. If they do not relate well to their boss or co-workers, they assume the blame. Adults abused as children also have abnormally stringent, self-imposed standards for performance. The tendency to be overly self-critical is reciprocally related to their self-deprecation. People who feel they are unworthy of praise will impose higher-than-normal expectations for performance and vice versa[2]. They constantly search for answers, rules and guidelines for finding happiness, and social/emotional success. Unwilling to trust their own instincts, they believe there is a right way, they can only find it[4].

Dysfunctional managers

If adults abused as children become managers, they carry with them the dysfunction of their families. The qualities dysfunctional managers exhibit include (see Figure 9):

- avoidance of conflict;
- refusal to ask for help;
- difficulty in delegating responsibility;
- perfectionism and workaholism;
- inability to trust others.

A dysfunctional manager's inability to express his/her feelings demonstrates a lack of good communication skills. In addition, a manager's unwillingness to take decisive action shows weak conflict management skills, and

Figure 8 The search for perfection

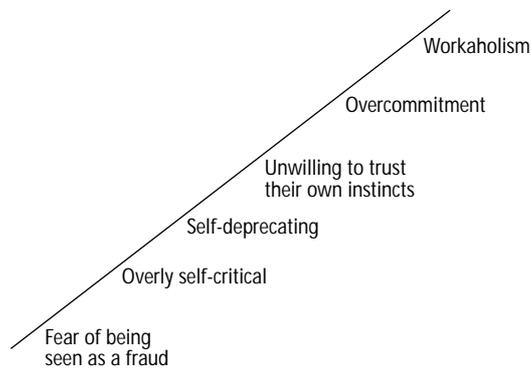


Figure 9 Qualities dysfunctional managers may exhibit



intolerance of poor performance evidences poor leadership skills[9].

Dysfunctional managers have trouble delegating and often become responsible *for* others rather than *to* others. When they become managers or supervisors, adults abused as children tend to monitor their employees too closely, watch over their shoulders, and produce tension. They dislike change and are rigid in their behaviour[6].

Because of their need for perfection, dysfunctional managers tend to delegate poorly and overmanage employees. Their perception of the job performance problems of subordinates as a direct reflection of themselves helps to explain the reluctance on the part of some managers to consult the EAP when employee problems arise[6].

As a result of unresolved boundary issues and the tendency to equate *doing* (job performance) with *being* (personal self-esteem), dysfunctional managers tend to give up their egos to the organization. This results in exaggerated loyalty, overaccommodation and rescuing. Company problems become the individual's personal problems, and company crises cause the employee a great deal of concern and worry. American corporations tend to support this way of thinking[6].

EAP intervention

The basic role of an employee assistance programme (EAP) is to provide a support structure for employees (see Figure 10); the ultimate goal is their recovery[9]. EAP intervention involves education, professional counselling, and referral to self-help groups. Inter-

vention also includes conducting seminars and workshops, providing printed materials as well as articles in the corporation's various publications, and educating employees who use the EAP. Finally, intervention includes providing self-training for supervisors as well as creating accurate job descriptions. This helps the employees to clarify their roles, get a clearer sense of their boss's expectations, and set specific goals and objectives[6].

It is estimated that from 35-50 per cent of the people seeking help from EAPs are adults who have been abused as children[6]. Thus, it is imperative that managers know the issues, as well as be able to recognize an adult who was abused as a child. In so doing, the manager can direct employees to the EAP for help in resolving some of their issues.

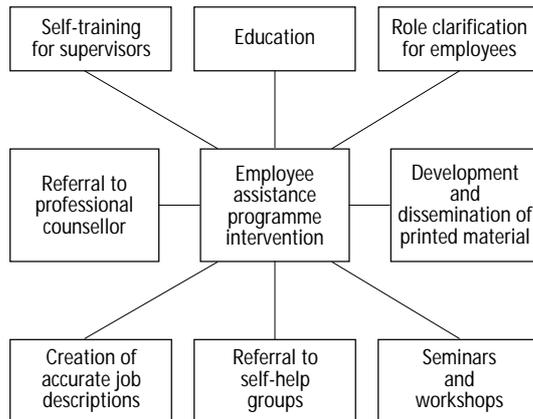
Conclusion

Approximately \$190.7 billion dollars are lost each year through lost sales, poor job performance, on-the-job accidents, absence from work, medical costs, and the costs of hiring and training new personnel[8].

In addition, corporate culture is beginning to show signs of change – shifting away from its penchant for rewarding overcommitment and workaholism. Many companies are encouraging healthier lifestyles for employees by sponsoring wellness programmes. These programmes stress such goals as achieving balance, making choices, and encouraging self-responsibility, goal setting, and enhancement of self-esteem[6].

Some of the ways to enhance communication in the workplace are for managers to

Figure 10 The role of employee assistance programme intervention



recognize actions of adults abused as children. They must be brought to the point where they recognize from where their patterns come, become aware of sibling and thus co-worker rivalry, and work at being better team players.

Adults abused as children bring to the workplace many strengths; they are self-reliant, autonomous, problem solvers, hard workers, loyal, possess empathetic skills, and can respond effectively to a crisis. They possess strong attributes which are needed in any corporation. To save money, enhance productivity, and reduce stress in the workplace, it is essential for managers to look carefully at

their employees' behaviour. These employees cannot and do not leave their trauma of childhood outside the door before entering the office. And one thing we know for sure is that: "Unresolved family issues from the past become one's fingerprints" [9].

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