

Impact of Social Issues on Public Sector Employees: Research Summary and Implications for Workplace Conflict Professionals

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Employees in the Public Sector face a range of workplace conflicts from the “macro” to the “micro.” State and federal budget cutbacks can jeopardize programs, which can create conflicts with clients who no longer meet eligibility criteria and/or with coworkers whose positions are no longer funded. Increasing stress in and out of the workplace affects work and home life and employees across the spectrum need additional assistance managing the impact of these complicated issues. Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) were designed as workplace benefit programs to provide services and training to help employees manage the issues most affecting their work.

The author recently partnered with a local EAP to conduct some focus group and survey research with nine (9) workplace sites including government/public sector, health care, and manufacturing to assess the social issues affecting their workplaces. Of the nine groups, four (4) of the groups were comprised of seventy one (71) employees from the Public Service sector. Participants in these groups included police, teachers, social workers, city and county administrative staff, and maintenance workers.

Several aspects of these research results should interest workplace conflict resolution practitioners and trainers. Managing personal and professional stress was a key theme for Public Service employees. Participants expressed desire for training and services that focused on personal coping strategies, including stress management, time management, improving workplace communication, and reducing family and workplace conflict. In addition to these personal needs, Public Service employees also expressed concern over issues of personal safety in their jobs, especially related to increasing violence from clients and the impact of gangs. Certified and licensed employees were interested in on-site training opportunities to fulfill state requirements that would reduce the costs related to travel and taking time for training and continuing education. Several participants were also interested in getting help with money management for their clients and themselves, as well as, personal retirement planning.

With the exceptions of personal finance and workplace communication all of the issues identified in these groups specific to Public Service employees and not mentioned in focus groups from health care or manufacturing sectors. The results suggest that targeted training and intervention strategies provided by conflict resolution professionals and trainers should include workplace communication, reducing violence, personal safety, and courses approved for continuing education credits for teachers and social workers.