

Working on Your Marriage – At Work

Realizing That a Happy Staff Is More Productive, Employers Offer Relationship Training

By RACHEL EMMA SILVERMAN

People often complain they are married to their jobs. Now, some companies are helping employees work on their marriages, on the job.

A small but growing number of companies have implemented training programs designed to help employees strengthen their marriages or other personal relationships. Some companies are motivated by religious values to encourage strong marriages and families. But now, amid evidence that divorce and relationship stress can make workers less efficient, more companies have begun offering marriage training programs with an eye to keeping their businesses running more smoothly and profitably.

Some employers are offering their workers free marriage or relationship education classes at corporate retreats, with spouses encouraged to attend. Others sponsor lunch-and-learn sessions at which workers hear speakers on relationship skills, like more diplomatic ways to fight with their spouses, or they provide audio programs with relationship tips for workers to listen to while driving. At some companies, the programs are aimed mainly at employees who are being transferred, which can create friction in a marriage.

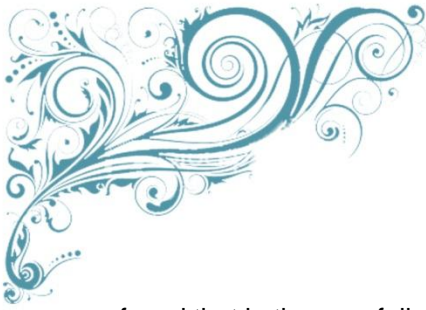
After an executive at Gregg Appliances Inc., an appliance and electronics retail chain based in Indianapolis, became concerned that workers were being unproductive or leaving the company because of marital stresses, the firm began sponsoring marriage training classes at corporate retreats in Florida for its general managers and their spouses. This year's session, which focused on finances, featured a version of the "Newlywed Game," so couples could gauge how well they really knew each other's financial habits.

Ed Koplín, a principal at X-nth Inc., an engineering firm based in Orlando, Fla., wanted to help his employees learn how to relate better to each other and to those outside of work. One important skill: how to listen more effectively, so the other party feels more understood. "These are life skills that will help you at work and help you at home," says Mr. Koplín, who works at the firm's Baltimore office.

Howard Yocum, a senior electrical engineer at X-nth, says the course has helped prevent his domestic arguments from escalating into bigger fights. "Instead of using fight-talk, I change it into more of a discussion-type thing," Mr. Yocum says.

Marriage training sessions are part of growing trend of employers offering programs -- from weight-loss regimes to childcare -- aimed at helping workers become happier, with the additional goal of making them more industrious.

Productivity lost from marriage and relationship stress can cost employers some \$6 billion annually, according to an estimate cited in a new report, "Marriage and Family Wellness: Corporate America's Business?" sponsored by the Marriage CoMission, a marriage strengthening advocacy group in Atlanta. Another study cited in the report



found that in the year following divorce, employees lost an average of four weeks of work. (The report is available at <http://www.marriagecommission.com/go/corporate>.)

"Unhappily married employees decrease profitability. Those in failing relationships can hurt a company's bottom line, through higher distractions and absences, higher health-care costs and increased stress," says Matthew Turvey, a psychologist and co-author of the report.

The programs are generally free or highly subsidized for workers. For employers, lunch-and-learn sessions can cost several hundred dollars for speakers, while short courses on relationship issues can cost about \$500 to \$1,500. Marriage retreats can cost companies several hundred dollars or more per couple, depending on the venue. Many marriage trainers are psychologists or are certified to teach marriage skills through programs often established by psychologists or clergy members.

At annual conferences that Chick-fil-A hosts for its franchise operators, the Atlanta-based restaurant chain has seminars on topics such as "How to Divorce-Proof Your Marriage" and offers marriage counselors for individual sessions with couples. The company also makes available to its corporate staffers and franchisees and their spouses Christian marriage training sessions at a rural retreat in Georgia.

A recent attendee was Karen Rogers, a Chick-fil-A property management analyst who has been married for 17 years. "It's important to take time away together, to focus on that relationship," she says, adding that the session was in seminar form, not group therapy. "They make it very safe. You're not up there spilling the dirty marital laundry out in front of your co-workers." The session was based on television show "The Amazing Race," and included segments on creating marital "teams."

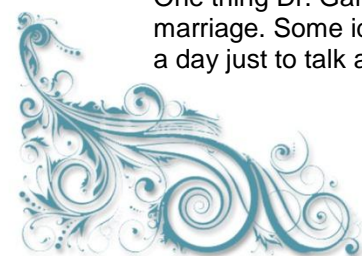
PRC, a sales outsourcing firm based in Plantation, Fla., recently hired marriage trainer Sheryl Kurland to lead lunchtime sessions on successful marriages and relationships in some offices. Ms. Kurland, an author and speaker on marriage issues, says her sessions have no religious overtones and are also open to gay and single employees. In her presentation, she includes four ways to handle arguments that work in most relationships. One idea is what she calls "your department, my department." If one spouse, say, never picks up the towels after a shower, you can nag him or her forever, or you can just decide to pick it up yourself. "End of subject, end of stress," says Ms. Kurland.

Workplace marriage programs can be controversial. Tim Gardner, who runs the Marriage Institute near Indianapolis, says several companies he has approached have been cool to his offers to teach courses because they fear marriage training programs could discriminate against single or divorced employees, or gay couples. Other companies say they have no business intruding in workers' personal lives.

Marriage trainers say their courses aren't marriage counseling, but courses that teach real skills, such as how to listen and communicate more effectively, and how to defuse disagreements before they escalate into full-blown conflicts.

"We're not talking about getting everyone in a hot tub and sharing all their problems," says Dr. Gardner. "It's a skills-based set that benefits all sides."

One thing Dr. Gardner teaches to clients such as Gregg Appliances is that couples should set goals in their marriage. Some ideas: set up a weekly date night or take a yearly vacation without the kids. Or set up 10 minutes a day just to talk and catch up, without focusing on scheduling or problem-solving or child-care logistics.





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Some employees at CommScope Inc., a telecommunications-equipment maker based in Hickory, N.C., are working with Dr. Gardner on a relationship-skills program called "Marriage@Work." "When I first announced it to my region, people thought it was a little too touchy-feely," says Steve Scattaregia, a regional vice president for CommScope in Indiana. "I work for a company that has given me a lot of latitude to try stuff like this."

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