

LONG ROAD TO A SMOKE-FREE WORKPLACE



Veallu Jagadeesan

Transformations are difficult to accomplish, especially when it comes to human habits and needs. Smoking, one of the most preventable causes of death and disability, continues to dog as one of the major workplace health hazards and concerns. But, Eagle Services Asia Pte Ltd (ESA) is an exceptional story on the fast track of corporate world.

In 2004, ESA crossed a milestone with respect to workplace health practices. The company prohibited smoking among its employees. The initiative, known as the Smoking Cessation Programme, aimed at building a smoke-free workplace. Today, the company boasts of a smoke free environment.

The Smoking Cessation Programme was organised by the Environmental Health & Safety (EH&S) Department of ESA (Singapore), one of the many initiatives in their mission to promote workplace health. This programme was launched with voluntary participation from ESA employees and Youngberg Wellness Centre was also engaged to assist with the implementation of the programme.

The programme duration and methodology encompassed six intervention sessions over a three months' period. Veallu Jagadeesan, EH&S executive at ESA, said, "At the end of the three months' period, smokers were expected to have given up the habit." The programme's comprehensive approach included post programme evaluation and assistance by Youngberg, which was needed to sustain the smoke free-lifestyle of the ex-smokers. The process of evaluation included medical tests and psychotherapy as their key methods. "A post programme evaluation

was also done after three months to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme," informed Veallu.

One of the key factors that lead to its eventual success was its proactive and people-friendly approach. Veallu explained, "The management gave smokers a chance to 'own up' to their problem instead of making it compulsory for them to attend the intervention programme." This avoided feelings of hurt or embarrassment and lead to the growth of a sense of ownership. In the process, employees participated in the transformation of their own smoking habits.

For the programme's success, it was critical that the management extended understanding and support to the participants. Veallu corroborates, "Employees who participated in this programme was given time off to attend the programme during the normal working hours, instead of making them attend during off-duty hours." In addition, medication such as Nicotine replacement patches for smokers intending to quit was heavily subsidised by the company. A total of 53 smoking employees participated in the intervention programme, out of which 15 have quit the habit completely, while the rest have reduced their smoking consumption. The current 28% success rate is indeed exceptional and encouraging for both the management and participants.

The benefits penetrated through to all levels, and created strong physical, mental and financial impact. The organisation gained more disciplined employees and a better work environment, where workers now valued their health and focused better on their work. Veallu opines, "The main benefit the company derived from launching this programme was increased productivity, where workers no longer lost time during working hours by going for smoke breaks."

To continue their efforts, ESA formed a Workplace Health Promotion (WHP) committee in 2005, to administer all WHP-related initiatives. Current programmes include employee wellness programmes like intervention talks, smoking cessation group therapy, half-day stress management workshops, and employee needs assessment, which includes testing and screening of blood pressure and cholesterol.

The fight to free its workplace from tobacco is a positive step and challenge that ESA is still working hard on. Veallu concludes, "The company's smoke-free policy is just one of the positive ways of ensuring optimal standards for occupational health and safety. It has and will continue to save all employees from a leading workplace health hazard and minimise their risk of lung cancer and heart diseases from smoking and passive smoking."

HEALTH PROMOTION BOARD

Health Promotion Board (HPB) can assist your organisation in the implementation of an effective 'Corporate Quit Smoking Programme'. HPB will host a half-day seminar entitled 'Partnerships in Smoking Control at Workplaces' on 13 May 2005. This seminar will offer practical tools for the successful implementation of smoking control programmes at the workplace and will share real-life case studies.

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