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Warren Shepell: growing EAPs in Canada

Neil Faba | June 08, 2011



Growing EAPs in Canada was no easy task, but Warren Shepell's rural upbringing taught him the value of perseverance.

Shepell points to his education as an instrumental part of his success in the employee assistance program (EAP) field. But he says the fact that he was able to receive an education is as inspiring as any of the lessons he learned.

"I grew up 100 miles north of Winnipeg on a farm 10 miles from the nearest town," says Shepell, who was raised in the community of Fisher Branch, Man. "The cards were really stacked against me—not deliberately, but nevertheless

stacked. However, I was fortunate; I was bright and precocious."

After completing Grade 9 by correspondence, Shepell's parents paid \$20 a month—a significant sum for the family at the time—to rent a house in town so that he could complete his education at Fisher Branch High School.

"Getting educated beyond elementary school was a fantastic feat for me. I had to persevere and push and delay my gratification—unlike many of my peers who partied and enjoyed their youth—for every one of those years. But it was truly an inspirational journey that I remember fondly."

Shepell says he learned patience, tolerance and perseverance through working with others on school projects, as well as empathy from meeting and learning about different people. "I felt very strongly that my spirit could have resided in anyone I read about or saw on the street and that, although I am very grateful to be me, I could have been born into the other person's schooling, religion, peers and their open- or closed-mindedness." These qualities, along with his passion for helping people through challenges, led him on the path to EAPs.

In 1979, Warren Shepell Consultants began providing EAP services to companies in Canada. While the EAP concept had been introduced in the U.S. a few years earlier, in Canada, it wasn't initially an easy sell. The company signed its first client, the North York Board of Education, in its inaugural year, but it would take two years to find its second client.

The determination that Shepell learned growing up came into play during this slow growth period. "Companies would say, 'People have to [get help] on their own. And I would say, 'When you have [employees] and you're concerned about their productivity, you should be concerned about their emotional well-being.'" By the time Shepell sold the company to

an investment firm in 2005, its client base had grown to more than 2,000 organizations representing more than four million employees.

The launch of EAP Specialist Inc. in August 2010 brought Shepell back into the EAP world, but with a difference: now he would focus on helping organizations audit their services to ensure that they are getting the best value for their employees. “Because I started the service, I’m very attached to the concept of making sure that the services are enhanced.”

Shepell says his legacy is that the work he has done with EAPs has helped bring mental health into the mainstream. “There is still a stigma attached to it—people don’t want to say that they’re going for counselling or that they’re depressed—but it’s far less than it used to be. I think I’ve contributed to...seeing mental health issues just as you would medical problems.”

Shepell dreams of one day making a film that helps people understand the power of the human spirit. “I have a great eye for creativity, a tremendous understanding of the complexities of people’s lives, and I enjoy films—especially their structure and the power of storytelling. I love impacting others in a good way.”

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