

'LIFE COACH' TRAINING FOR FAMILY ASSISTANTS: BELGIUM

1. Organisations involved

- Service d'Aide aux Familles bruxelloises Asbl
- Bouche-à-Oreille (BAO Group)
- Fonds d'Expérience Professionnelle (Fund of Professional Experience, Belgian Federal Government)

2. Description of the case

2.1. Introduction

The association Service d'Aide aux Familles bruxelloises Asbl (Support Service to Brussels Families) is a small non-profit organisation which provides care and support to individuals and families in Brussels. It employs 50 people, all women, 45% of whom are over 45 years old. Ninety per cent of these women are employed as care workers (*aide familiale*, family assistant).

Family assistants provide care to people who find themselves in difficult situations, such as single-parent families, people with disabilities, people with long-term or very serious diseases, elderly people and people in need of palliative care. The services they provide are aimed at 'maintaining people at home and ensuring good quality of life' (1). This requires them to work not only with the person in difficulty, but also with that person's family and close environment.

The services they provide range from everyday care (cleaning, shopping, helping in the house) to sanitary care (health, hygiene, safety, general comfort), educational support (advice about health, hygiene, child care), emotional support (listening and identifying difficulties, dialogue, support during palliative care) and social support (help with administrative procedures, directing towards relevant social services). The ultimate aim of the assistant's work is to help people regain their sense of autonomy and empowerment.

While they carry out all these various tasks, they should not overstep their roles and qualifications. Providing assistance that can be both curative and preventative, at both an individual and a collective level, requires a significant balancing of skills.

The job can be stressful, with employees often confronted with very difficult individual situations (people who are very sick or disabled, people in great social distress). In addition, while they have excellent technical skills, many of the family assistants lack the training in interpersonal skills to be able to deal with these difficult situations. The stress this creates causes a high rate of sick leave among the employees. Psychosocial disorders, such as burnout, are of particular concern, and there is a high rate of younger workers who leave the job after a few years.

Career prospects are non-existent. Although employees must have a 1-year diploma to work as a family assistant, there are no opportunities for promotion without higher academic qualifications. There is no system of formal recognition of their work experience. Many of them are mothers, sometimes single mothers, with no time outside work to pursue additional training that would provide them with the qualifications needed to progress their careers.

(1) Commission communautaire commune de Bruxelles-Capitale, *Arrêté du Collège réuni relatif à l'agrément et au mode de subventionnement des services d'aide à domicile du 25 octobre 2007*. (Order on the approval and subsidising of the family care providing services of 25 October 2007), published 01/02/2008. Retrieved 16/10/2015 from: <http://www.ccc-ggc.irisnet.be/fr/pdf/arrete-college-reuni-25-octobre-2007-relatif-agrement-et-mode-subventionnement-services-aide-a-domicile.pdf>

In 2012, Service d'Aide aux Familles bruxelloises Asbl organised a European symposium about family assistance. Following this, the director of the association, Ms Marie Arnould, set up the 'Life Coach' project to help her employees to deal with the issue of stress and lack of career prospects. The project received financial support from the Fonds d'Expérience Professionnelle (Fund for Professional Experience), a Belgian government organisation, set up in 2004, which provides funding to initiatives aiming to improve the wellbeing of workers over 45 years old.

2.2. Aims

The 'Life Coach' project has two aims:

- to 'coach' family assistants in the communication tools and techniques that will enable them to deal with difficult situations; and
- to provide a recognised 'life coach' qualification.

2.3. What was done, and how?

The first phase of the project consists of a series of training modules, delivered by Bouche-à-Oreille (BAO Group, selected following a negotiated tender procedure; website: <http://www.baogroup.be/BAO-site/index%20fr.htm>), which specialises in coaching and mentoring training.

The training is voluntary and free of charge. However, during this first phase, the training is provided only to assistants who are over 45 years old, as their maturity and experience is believed to increase the likelihood of completion. If the training achieves its objectives, it will be offered to other employees at a later stage.

The association receives subsidies from various funds (Fund of Professional Experience, Brussels city services, Belgian federal government) to maintain the salary of the employees taking part in the training to compensate for their absence at work and to pay for the services of the training company.

Initially, six family assistants are taking part in the training modules. Several social workers who work in the association are also taking part in order to improve their working relations with the family assistants.

2.3.1. Training content

The training consists of 10 two-day modules, one per month. Each module deals with a different topic or technique. The techniques that are taught include, among others:

- the 'GROW' method, which clarifies the objectives of the family assistant's help with the family, and discusses the various options open to them;
- the Karpman triangle or 'drama triangle', which helps to better understand the positions of the various parties in a conflict;
- conflict management techniques;
- strategies of personal and professional evaluation to define the assistant's own position.

At the end of the training, the coach should be able to:

- manage his/her emotions (to protect both the assistance relationship and themselves);
- manage, and help to manage, change;
- generate creative solutions to potential conflicts;
- manage conflicts (within the families but also with colleagues);
- override value judgments;
- know how to ask the right questions and manage different dialogues;
- be ready to listen, have empathy (emotional intelligence) and understand what the beneficiaries feel;
- stimulate clients to help attain autonomy;
- put in place adequate strategies for the client, taking into account individual constraints and environment.

2.3.2. Discussion groups and working groups

Following the training modules, employees can attend discussion groups to share their experience of the training with their colleagues. Working groups, led by the company director, have also been created to put the learning into practice.

2.4. What was achieved?

This example has helped to identify issues within the work that cause stress and burnout. This goes towards the sustainability of the work and the motivation and retention of older staff.

The project started in December 2013 and the first training modules took place in January 2014. The director reported positive outcomes from the training modules, mentioning that they have helped to solve latent conflicts within the team. An interview with the employees who participated in the training confirmed this positive impression. In particular, they highlighted the capacity of the trainers to adapt to their individual situations and the usefulness of the techniques learned. The last training module took place in December 2014.

A professional evaluation of the training started in May 2014, in cooperation with the Haute Ecole Paul-Henri Spaak of Brussels (social engineering masters section). To this end, the employees taking part in the training complete a feedback form after each training module. Preliminary results from the evaluation, which is due to be published towards the end of 2015, show that all participants felt that the training strengthened their ability to manage conflictual situations as well as to manage their emotions and take distance from their own life experience.²

2.5. Success factors

The factors that are contributing to the success of this ongoing initiative include:

- *Involvement of management:* The director identified a problem and is ready to tackle it. She is highly involved in the process, even taking part in the training modules to better understand all the steps her employees are following.
- *Involvement of workers:* The voluntary nature of the programme ensures that all participating employees are motivated. Restricting the programme to older workers, who have the professional maturity to identify problem situations, also strengthens engagement. The tools they are trained in can be used throughout the work environment, ensuring a benefit for the whole team.
- *Upskilling:* The programmes provide the employees with new qualifications (upskilling), which changes their perception of the work. There is a focus both on career and on the skills needed to improve contact with clients.
- *Financial support:* Financial support was provided by the Fund of Professional Experience, which proved essential to set up and implement the project in this non-profit association.

2.6. Transferability

The experience is transferable to other organisations providing similar types of home care services where employees are confronted with difficult situations that require a high degree of communication skills in addition to technical skill.

As this is a non-profit organisation, the financial support of several regional and federal institutions is essential. For other non-profits, transferability may equally depend on financial resources and the availability of external financial support.

² Working document of the evaluation "Feed-back de la concertation évaluation des compétences acquises/renforcées après la formation coaching par les aides familiales", unpublished.

2.7. Further information

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3. References and resources

- Interview with Marie Arnould, director of the association Service d'Aide aux Familles Bruxelloises Asbl.
- Commission communautaire commune de Bruxelles-Capitale, *Arrêté du Collège réuni relatif à l'agrément et au mode de subventionnement des services d'aide à domicile du 25 octobre 2007*. (Order on the approval and subsidising of the family care providing services of 25 October 2007), published 01/02/2008. Retrieved 16/10/2015 from: <http://www.ccc-ggc.irisnet.be/fr/pdf/arrete-college-reuni-25-octobre-2007-relatif-agrement-et-mode-subventionnement-services-aide-a-domicile.pdf>
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- Service d'Aide aux Familles Bruxelloises a.s.b.l., *Rapport d'activités 2012* (annual activity report 2012).
- Working document of the evaluation "Feed-back de la concertation évaluation des compétences acquises/renforcées après la formation coaching par les aides familiales", unpublished.
- Presentation on the project by Marie Arnould at the workshop 'Safer and Healthier Work at Any Age', 13 March 2014, Brussels.