



CRAIG SCHREINER - State Journal

Steve Cook, right, founder of Capital Chaplains, visits with Christine Lade, business manager at the Engelhart Center in Madison. Engelhart has contracted with Capital Chaplains to provide counseling services for employees. Engelhart sells and services various brands of motorized equipment, including motorcycles, watercraft, all-terrain vehicles, snowmobiles and lawn and garden items.

Hired chaplains aid workers

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At a time when stress at work is high and funds for additional benefits are low, Steve Cook is finding a niche as a corporate chaplain.

Cook owns Capital Chaplains, a for-profit company he started in Madison in 2005. He offers care services for employees and managers dealing with personal situations both during and outside of work.

He started the business after seeing a trend toward companies hiring chaplains to assist employees.

"We're in the midst of a horrible recession and there are three companies that signed on" this year, Cook said.

Nationwide, the demand for corporate chaplains is on the rise, said Dwayne Reece, vice president of field development for Corporate Chaplains of America, which is headquartered in Raleigh, N.C. The nonprofit organization started almost 14 years ago. "More companies added (corporate chaplains) in the first month of this year than the first month of last year," he said.



Steve Cook
is founder of
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A similar surge occurred after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, but it lasted only a couple months, he said.

CCA has about 100 chaplains in 22 states, contracting with 650 businesses.

The combination of mortgage struggles, the tight economy and job loss in the last year prompted more companies to offer chaplain services to address employee concerns, he said.

Seven companies in the Madison area contract with Capital Chaplains, which is staffed by Cook and five other chaplains, all of whom work part time. They are either ordained ministers or licensed

marriage and family therapists, Cook said. However, no official certification is required by the state to be a corporate chaplain, he said.

Cook, who is an ordained minister and associate director with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, a professional collegiate ministry organization, likens his service to other employee assistance programs.

"The big difference is a chaplain assistance program is very much relational in nature," he said.

Robert Hintz, owner and general manager for Madison's Engelhart Center, said his company has contracted with Capital Chaplains for two years and describes the interaction as a "huge success."

"A lot of employees are stressed with situations at home and other economic issues," Hintz said. "A lot of them are not comfortable about speaking with their employer about those situations."

That's where Capital Chaplains comes in. A chaplain meets weekly with employees at each client business.

Chaplain's

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The timing depends on what works best for the employees.

For example, Cook goes to Pellitteri Waste Systems from 5 to 8:30 a.m. on Tuesdays.

Employees can either set up a formal 15- to 20-minute discussion with Cook or have a casual chat. It's about building a relationship so "they know who to contact when a situation comes up," he said.

Hintz acknowledged in the beginning some employees "thought it would be forced religion." However, "it was completely opposite of that."

Cook said he doesn't men-

tion religion unless the employee does.

Engelhart averages about 40 employees on the payroll, depending on the season, and Hintz estimates about 80 percent take advantage of the program.

"It was probably one of the biggest surprises I had was how many employees took advantage and used the service," he said.

The chaplain services are paid for by the company and other benefits were not cut, Hintz said.

"In the long term, our customers will see the value," because the employees are happier at work, he said.

Kelly Williams, a psychology professor at Edgewood College who teaches organization leadership and development,

said research shows businesses that offer employee assistance programs can reduce the amount of turnover, ultimately saving money.

The organization is "forging a psychological contract with their employees that really says 'we care about you,'" she said. "In the long run, you've got employees who realize they're valued and that's a message that goes a long way."

Cook charges a basic rate for his service, which is billed per employee for a specific length of contract. The rate is between \$15 and \$25 per employee per month, depending on the number of employees and work-site locations.

Ganser Co., which does exterior construction, contracted with Capital Chaplains in

January while in the middle of some cutbacks.

"We wanted our employees and families to know they can talk to someone," said Jocelyn Dornfeld, human resource manager.

In addition to Cook, chaplain Jorge Hernandez also works with Ganser's Spanish-speaking employees. "So far, it's worked out very well," Dornfeld said. "A lot of people have opened up to both of them."

Chip Hunter, director for the MBA program in strategic human resources for UW-Madison, said employee morale will be better if companies that have to make cuts also can provide employee assistance. "In the long run, the company is going to be healthier."