

# HIV/AIDS

## Peer educator groups in the workplace

*The advantages of peer education, within a comprehensive and resourced workplace HIV/AIDS programme was highlighted in the previous edition of the SA Labour Bulletin. **David Dickinson** now looks at the groups that peer educators set up within the workplace.*

**T**he organisation of HIV/AIDS peer educators into workplace groups (which go under a range of names including; AIDS committee, AIDS task team, and AIDS imbizo) has advantages. These include:

- Groups allow peer educators to support each other and maintain high levels of activity. Importantly such groups can help bridge the gap between training and action.
- Groups support ongoing learning. Importantly, peer educators can discuss concerns and problems relevant to their workplace.
- Groups can support a co-ordinated workplace HIV/AIDS programme. Critically, they can channel information on HIV/AIDS down to the workforce and up to management and unions.

### **Features of peer educator groups**

One of the most revealing features of peer educator groups in South African workplaces is that they have often arisen spontaneously. Employees set them up, frequently without support from management or unions. Although, a comprehensive workplace HIV/AIDS programme should establish and

support peer educator groups, it should always be remembered that the key feature for their success is their voluntary nature. This is an important point that management and unions need to grasp.

One interesting outcome of this feature is that peer educator groups are often diverse with volunteers from different backgrounds – Afrikaans artisans, African shop stewards, secretaries, operators, supervisors, and others. Because concern on HIV/AIDS cuts across social divisions, these diverse groups work for a common cause and are valuable forums for transformation. For example, white staff that join these groups often see, for the first time, the depth of poverty in the communities that many workers live and realise that this issue must also be addressed.

### **Support for peer educator groups**

It is in the interests of both management and unions to support peer groups given that they benefit the company, its workers, and local communities. The key help that companies can provide is appropriate resources. Unions can also provide

important support.

### **Issues for peer educator groups**

A number of steps and issues need to be addressed for peer educator groups to work effectively. Some of these are the responsibility of the peer educators, others require the support and involvement of management and unions. These include:

- *Balancing voluntary motivation and professionalism*

The core resource of peer educators is their enthusiasm and energy. However, this should not exclude working in a professional way. Working in a group will encourage peer educators to take their role seriously. By mutual agreement members of the group should agree responsibilities and be accountable for them.

Additionally, management needs to understand that such groups, while voluntary, are benefiting the company. Concerned employees are adding an 'extra shift' through their peer education work, for example, by meeting in their lunch hour. One compromise reached at a mine was that workers on shift were given time off to attend the monthly peer

educator meeting, but if they were not on shift they were expected to attend the meeting in their own time.

- *Bridging the gap between training and action*

Peer educator groups can help bridge the gap between training and action. Ideally, peer educators from a particular workplace, or work unit, should be trained together and training should include planning the group's initial activities. Where a peer educator group already exists, newly trained peer educators can be integrated into existing activities. One useful initial activity is for groups to conduct an HIV/AIDS survey of their workplace. This does not need to be a complicated exercise. It is useful to collect information on employees' knowledge and concerns on HIV/AIDS, but a survey also gets the group working on a clear task. Moreover, it advertises the new peer educator group and its members to every employee.

- *Updating knowledge and skills*

A few days of HIV/AIDS training cannot cover every issue and it is important the peer educators refresh and update their knowledge. Peer educator groups are ideal for this and meetings should include updates on particular issues. There should also be time for the group's members to discuss how they communicate messages and swap tips on what works well.

As well as information and communication techniques, peer educator groups need to discuss broader issues. Because of the diverse nature of these groups there will be a range of views concerning HIV/AIDS and it is important that people are allowed to air these if they are not to get frustrated.

- *Campaigning effectively in the workplace and community*

Effective campaigning by peer educators involves three key aspects: direct communication with peers, support for a wider company HIV/AIDS programme, and community initiatives. Working in a group, peer educators can greatly enhance these aspects of their work. Peer education relies on a willingness to raise HIV/AIDS with workmates. Peer educator groups can support this and encourage members to successfully communicate. Some groups choose a particular topic each month and, following a refresher discussion, raise this in the workplace. Expecting regular feedback from every peer educator is valuable in encouraging members to be active.

The role of peer educator groups within the company's overall response to HIV/AIDS depends on how good that response is. Where – as is still common – the company's response is weak a key role of peer education groups is to constructively point out deficiencies. Finally, community-based activities are important. HIV/AIDS cannot be stopped at the factory fence so initiatives must also be taken in the community.

#### **Stumbling blocks**

There are many possible stumbling blocks for peer educator groups. The most common experiences include:

- *The need for stamina*

New peer educator groups often start off with a lot of energy and face a wide range of challenges around HIV/AIDS because very little has been done. If things go well, they will start to make a significant impact on some of the easier tasks (such as making sure that condoms are available or assisting in a company-wide VCT programme). But what then remains is the long, hard and far less glamorous slog of changing people's

attitudes and behaviour. It is easy for peer educators to get disheartened at this point, since it seems that the group is achieving less, and energy can tail off. But the reality is that HIV/AIDS is here for a long time to come and we need peer education for many decades. Groups need stamina for long-term activity.

- *Frustration with the company's response*

If management is not playing its part in responding to HIV/AIDS then volunteer peer educators are going to become frustrated: they and unions need to ensure the situation is changed. However, even if the company is committed, individual supervisors and lower-level managers can frustrate peer educators by not supporting their work.

- *Dealing with different employee categories*

Different categories of employees – permanent, part-time, temporary, and sub-contract workers – work alongside each other, but HIV/AIDS does not stop at these divisions. Peer educator groups should include all categories of workers. But when different terms and conditions of employment apply this presents difficult problems. For example, if workers have different access to health care this will complicate any message that peer educators promote. This is a complex area that will be discussed in a future article.

#### **Conclusion**

Unions should encourage their members to participate in peer educator groups as they provide an invaluable part of any workplace response to HIV/AIDS.

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