

# STIGMA REDUCTION AT THE WORKPLACE

## THE CASE OF AMAZON MOTORS KENYA LTD

*Narrated by Ogake, Peer Educator and Steering Committee Member*



The story of Amazon Motors Kenya, the dealer of Volvo cars in Kenya, is a typical example of how workplaces can establish workplace programmes that ultimately can lead to stigma reduction, openness in discussing HIV and AIDS, sexuality and promotion of self-disclosure, as well as encourage positive regards towards those living with HIV at the workplace.

The background to the HIV/AIDS intervention and stigma reduction at Amazon Motors can be seen in the history of HIV/AIDS in Kenya. With little information, any case of HIV infection and AIDS related death was treated with a lot of stigma and discrimination. The fact that HIV was spread through sex increased the stigma in a society where the topic of sex was, and to some extent still is, a taboo. HIV was seen as a disease of “sinners” and a “curse” to the wicked. The same stigma had taken toll at Amazon Motors.

## Stigma, Silence and Shame

In 1999, there was a suspected case at Amazon Motors when a worker manifested symptoms of HIV infection. During those days, any such condition was automatically construed as AIDS symptoms and the worker was treated with all manner of discrimination. As the colleagues now openly say, they had labelled his cup so that no one dared use it during break times and avoided close contact and even social interaction with him. This mistreatment only aggravated stigma to HIV/AIDS and the workers now say that when he later died it was more because of the stigma than of the disease itself.

What then followed at the company was even more dramatic; the workers picked up his workshop gown and burned it to kill any germs or HIV virus that may have been attached to it. This was the height of stigma based on ignorance! No one would dare to be suspected of HIV infection since they would go through the same stigma and discrimination. The three “Ss” had been effectively stamped at the workplace: Stigma, Silence and Shame!

## Stigma Reduction Starts

Amazon Motors joined the Swedish Workplace HIV/AIDS Programme (SWHAP) in 2005. The programme initially faced resistance and hostility because of a rumour among the workforce that the management wanted to find out who were HIV positive and replace them with new workers. Luckily, the committee was representative of sections in the company and union representatives and its members took their time to explain about the programme to their colleagues.

Nevertheless, when the workers heard that the programme would involve HIV testing they were still fearful of stigma and discrimination. However, when the management expressed commitment to the company’s HIV/AIDS Policy and its provisions on non-discrimination, as well as encouraged employees to know their status, it was well received. The Policy was published in brochures and every employee was given a copy. Tension reduced further as education sessions on HIV transmission and prevention followed. The facilitators also had an HIV positive person who talked about positive living and the importance of HIV testing. This was a good start towards stigma reduction.

## Open Discussions

Experiences from other workplaces hindered immediate VCT uptake. A week after the education session, only a few committee members had taken up the HIV test at a nearby hospital. Upon inquiry, it was reported that the hospital had an ongoing case of disclosure of an HIV positive worker at a local company that led to her dismissal from work. It was obvious why the employees at Amazon were afraid to go to the same hospital for testing!

Upon consultation with the SWHAP Coordinator, the company embarked on onsite VCT. Within the same period, a group of employees were trained as peer educators. The very first attempt of onsite VCT saw more than 50% of employees tested. This was an indicator that the company had broken ground towards destigmatising HIV/AIDS in the company. Employees became more open to discuss about their prior misconceptions and stigma.

## Lessons from Amazon Motors on Stigma and Discrimination

- ✂ Stigma on HIV/AIDS is rooted in misinformation and misconceptions on the transmission and spread of HIV.
- ✂ Stigma is also acquired through observation of negative experiences of others in the environment or workplace.
- ✂ Stigma leads to discrimination at the workplace demonstrated through for instance dismissal, isolation, and avoidance.
- ✂ There is need for education awareness sessions to help address misconceptions related to HIV/AIDS.
- ✂ Involvement of persons living with HIV is an important catalyst towards a stigma free environment.
- ✂ Policies spelling out non-discriminative practices at the workplace are fundamental to effective programmes that can reduce stigma.
- ✂ The management’s commitment to the fighting of stigma is crucial and impacts positively among employees. It enhances VCT uptake, disclosure and positive living of those infected.
- ✂ Workplace committees on HIV/AIDS programmes are equally important in promoting programme acceptance and uptake of various components.
- ✂ Involvement of peer educators compliments the efforts of steering committees. They are important agents to promoting such positive practices as less risky behaviour, VCT uptake and positive living.

## The Story of Christine

*Christine, a lady working for Amazon, had realized her HIV status before the programme started. At that time, she was too ill to work and was laid off on medical grounds. Having witnessed the launch of the SWHAP, she decided to seek support and go for HIV/AIDS counselling. She regained her health and the company, which had embraced the programme and the policy, accepted her back to work! There is no better demonstration of the company's commitment to support the HIV infected. Christine decided to be an example of Positive Living and help her colleagues to look at HIV/AIDS differently and never stigmatise or discriminate. She held an open talk at the company about how she silently suffered the fear of stigma and discrimination and the employees started narrating how they had treated the colleague who passed on in 2001. It was a final death knell to stigma and discrimination.*



*The Swedish Workplace HIV/AIDS Programme (SWHAP) is a joint initiative by the International Council of Swedish Industry (NIR) and the Swedish Industrial and Metalworkers' Union (IF Metall). It is a long-term strategy to contribute to the establishment and/or support of HIV and AIDS programmes at Swedish related workplaces in Sub-Saharan Africa. SWHAP is cofunded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida.*

[www.swhap.org](http://www.swhap.org)



*The Swedish Industrial and Metalworkers' Union (IF Metall) organises more than 380,000 members at nearly 12,400 workplaces, affiliated to 52 local branches. IF Metall is aiming to safeguard the members' interest and strength in order to create the best possible conditions in working life as well as in society at large. This includes an extensive cooperation with trade unions internationally.*

[www.ifmetall.se](http://www.ifmetall.se)



*The International Council of Swedish Industry (NIR) is an associate to the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, Sweden's major business organisation, representing more than 55,000 member companies, commissioned to support and broaden the scope of operations of Swedish industry on markets characterised by economic, political or social complexities.*

[www.nir.se](http://www.nir.se)