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Trust can ease the stress

Healthy workplaces start with healthy work relationships, GRAHAM LOWE writes

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A decade ago, workplace health experts warned that job stress was reaching epidemic proportions. Today, we are hard-pressed to find evidence that things have improved.

In fact, we find the opposite. According to Statistics Canada, one in three workers are stressed out owing to excessive work demands and hours. Tallying up the costs, health care expenditures are 50 per cent higher for workers reporting high stress levels, and stress-related absences cost employers an estimated \$3.5-billion annually.

The bright spot is that mounting evidence shows the positive benefits of health-enhancing work environments. Workplace thinking and action are shifting, paying more attention to the underlying determinants of health. The logic is compellingly simple: A healthy work environment means healthy employees, who can sustain healthy performance for the organization over the long term.

So why aren't more employers rushing in this direction? Because the ingredients of a truly healthy workplace fall outside the conventional management definition of health promotion as helping employees to make healthy lifestyle choices, posing a far greater challenge than implementing a wellness program.

Instead it requires reckoning with relationships, trust and other basic features of organizational life.

That's why it's important to understand how employees view a healthy workplace. Ultimately, they are the best judges.

A national survey by Canadian Policy Research Networks asked workers whether they considered their work environments to be healthy. The results confirmed that the key dimensions of workplace relationships are strongly associated with perceptions of a healthy work environment.

Workers in jobs that are stressful and hectic with heavy workloads and conflicting demands don't consider their work environments to be healthy. This validates through the eyes of employees a key finding from job stress research: that demanding jobs in which individuals have little control over pressures and workloads pose health risks.

But this study offers a new insight about healthy workplaces. More important than workloads and demands are the social relationships in the workplace.

The survey found that, from an employee's perspective, the foundations of a healthy work environment are good communication, a positive relationship with one's supervisor, friendly and helpful co-workers

and receiving recognition. Both employees and employers benefit from these "healthy" relationships through higher job satisfaction and commitment, reduced turnover and less absenteeism.

This research suggests that, at a deeper level, healthy work environments also are built on trust. Many employees understand this, especially those who have lived through trust-shattering experiences such as downsizing, mergers or massive restructuring.

In focus group discussions, employees linked trust with the very same conditions that were equated with a healthy workplace. More than anything else, trust for these workers depended on open and supportive relationships, especially with supervisors. High-quality people management creates trust through respectful, honest and fair treatment of each individual. These features have been linked to good mental health by Martin Shain, a senior scientist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, and other workplace health experts.

This gets to the heart of the psychological contract between employee and employer.

This means that well-articulated corporate values can provide guideposts for behaviour that not only create trust, but also contribute to employee health and wellness. But it is essential that values result in meaningful action. Many organizations include respect in their values, yet it rings hollow unless put into practice on a daily basis. This is how the foundation for a psychologically healthy work environment is laid.

The Catch-22 here is that many healthy workplace strategies run into barriers imposed by high job stress and low trust, two conditions that feed off each other in a downward spiral. Overworked, cynical and disengaged employees will be change-resistant, not change-ready -- even though they would be better off as a result of the changes.

Some sound principles of change management can help to break out of this vicious circle.

Based on documented cases of healthy workplaces, there is no doubt that a key success factor is strong commitment from senior management to create and maintain a healthy work environment, consistently reinforced by how they act toward employees, and this may call for change in how work gets done. For example, the management at Scania, a Swedish truck manufacturer, follow through on their commitment to employee well-being by rewarding teamwork, recognizing knowledge and contributions and supporting continuous work environment improvements -- all of which is reinforced through a culture of respect for every employee.

The bedrock of workplace health is a people-oriented management approach. This requires incorporating employee health and wellness into corporate business plans, values and "employer of choice" strategies. Doing so will open the way for healthy workplace initiatives to receive the management support, resources and commitment throughout the organization needed to succeed.

At the same time, many change experts emphasize the need for a high level of involvement of all employee groups in the organization, making it their change process. Health must be a shared responsibility, not something done by human resource or health and safety departments. Managers, employees, and unions where they exist, must engage in open discussions about the role of the entire organization in creating health.

A major hurdle managers -- and indeed everyone in an organization -- must overcome in launching successful change is moving from thinking to acting. This addresses the contradictions in management

statements and actions regarding employee health -- the "disconnect" that demoralizes employees, fuels organizational inertia and over time can erode trust.

When I make the above arguments to audiences of managers, most nod their heads in agreement. They know what needs to be done. Yet closing this knowing-doing gap, as Stanford University's Jeffery Pfeffer and Robert Sutton call it, is where many change initiatives get derailed.

So managers need to weigh the options. Implementing a healthy lifestyle program is a straightforward change to execute. It certainly is easier than trying to change an organization's culture to be more trusting and respectful, fostering better communications and making supervisors more supportive.

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Guiding principles

Supportive culture and values: Creating and maintaining a healthy workplace requires a supportive culture that clearly values employees and is trust-based. Ideally, the process of creating a healthy workplace should be designed to strengthen trust.

Leadership: Commitment from top management is critical, and must take the form of visible leadership on health issues. Employees judge commitment by the actions of the chief executive officer and the executive team. Leadership must also be exercised throughout the organization, especially by line managers.

Use a broad definition of health: Good mental and physical health means more than the absence of illness, injury and disease. It also means leading a balanced life, developing one's potential, making a meaningful contribution to the organization, and having a say in workplace decisions.

Participative team approach: Implementing a healthy workplace strategy requires an integrated approach, guided by teams that include management, health and safety, human resources, employees and unions. This is not just a health issue. Direct employee involvement in all stages is especially critical to success.

Customized plan: Collaboratively develop a workplace health policy and action plan with clear goals. The policy and plan must be tailored to the business context, work force characteristics, and documented gaps in the work environment. Learn from each change introduced and refine the plan accordingly.

Link to strategic goals: Clearly link health issues and outcomes to the organization's strategic goals. Integrate health and well-being objectives into the organization's business planning process, so that over time, all management decisions take health into account.

Continuing support: Allocate resources that ensure continuity to healthy workplace actions. Provide training, especially to managers at all levels, to sustain the initiative and imbed it into how the organization operates.

Evaluate and communicate: Open and continuous communication is a key success factor in any organizational change initiative, and health is no different.

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