

The language of productivity is the language of workplace health

The same workplace practices that lead to increased employee health also lead to greater productivity and performance

Workplace health promotion has hit a wall and its lack of status marginalizes worker health.

Change agents inside organizations must do three things to push workplace health promotion up to a higher level.

First, take every opportunity to link employee health and safety to the organization's performance and its business strategy.

Second, expand the discussion of individual attitudes and behaviour beyond health to include productivity.

And third, think of healthy work environments as the enabling context for learning and innovation.

Managers must reframe their thinking about high-performing organizations by recognizing that health and performance go hand in hand. The same workplace practices that lead to increased employee health also lead to greater productivity and performance.

Here's how. Skills, collaboration, change and innovation are the four pillars of a successful 21st century organization. A healthy work environment is the precondition for generating skills and knowledge, collaborative working relationships, change readiness and innovation.

There is abundant research evidence that a healthy work en-

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vironment is one in which individuals are:

- challenged but not overworked;
- treated fairly and with respect, which fosters a climate of trust and commitment;
- provided the resources and equipment needed to do their jobs effectively;
- given job autonomy and opportunities for input into workplace decisions;
- supervised by someone who is a good communicator and supportive of their needs; and
- appropriately rewarded and recognized for their contributions.

These ingredients also are equally crucial for strategy implementation.

Leading employers understand the importance of developing and using the organization's human capabilities. Yet, a lack of support for skill development and application is a chronic problem in many workplaces. Surveys show that 25 per cent of Canadian workers face barriers to utilizing their skills, experience and education in their jobs. A major reason is that workers are not empowered to con-

tribute. Such constraints are the same factors contributing to high job stress.

Innovation also depends on healthy work environments. According to Thomas Stewart, an expert on intellectual capital, knowledge management is about connection, not collection. Innovation does not happen because of technology, such as a new "knowledge management" database. Rather, it results from workers having opportunities to learn, experiment, and even make mistakes — and to share this knowledge with co-workers.

Business success also depends on collaboration. Team-based organizations with flexible job designs that involve workers in decision-making and information sharing are more innovative than traditional, bureaucratic organizations.

But what's equally important is a high level of trust and commitment amongst employees. For example, highly sophisticated document-sharing software enables global teams to work together virtually, but a precondition for the effective use of this software is a high level of trust, otherwise nobody will share "their" information with others. More generally, trust and commitment are key ingredients of a healthy work environment.

Organizations that lack the capacity to change won't survive.

Change brought on by cost-driven decisions to downsize or restructure has had many negative impacts. This includes serious employee health problems, as documented in a recent *British Medical Journal* article that found increased risk of cardiovascular disease among Finnish municipal workers who survived downsizing.

From another perspective, organizational experts talk about "silent killers" of strategy implementation: barriers to positive change that lurk just below the surface in the culture and practices of organizational life. The biggest of these is poor communication — a key ingredient of a healthy work environment.

Creating positive change that employees are ready to embrace requires a healthy change process. The key to this is a high level of employee involvement in actually shaping the change. This is real empowerment, and it defines a psychologically healthy workplace.

For the idea of a healthy, high-performing organization to become reality, there needs to be a shared vision of what this kind of organization looks like.

To capture the imagination of organizational leaders, that vision must be articulated through words like: capabilities, collaboration, change, innovation and strategy implementation.

This is the new language that workplace health promotion advocates must speak.

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