



Healthy Workplace Healthy Workers

Employers should take a comprehensive view of the benefits, programs and policies that affect employees' health, well-being and productivity

By Daphne Woolf

The mantra that a healthy employee will be a “better” employee is familiar to all of us. Of course good physical and mental health are important. But many organizations believe that to meet their desired business outcomes, the real imperative is to foster a healthy workplace.

Doing so, however, requires an approach to workplace benefits, HR policies, programs and organizational culture that goes beyond the scope of health care coverage as traditionally defined.

To test this hypothesis, we consider the following:

- What makes a healthy workplace?
- What makes an “excellent” employee?
- What is the definition and role of health?
- How does an employer promote a healthy work environment?

Making a healthy workplace

Before discussing ways to develop excellent, engaged employees, it is useful to consider the elements that comprise a “healthy workplace” using Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

At the base of Maslow’s triangle is

physiological need: food, water and clothing — the basics. The equivalent in a healthy workplace is cash compensation (base pay, shortand long-term incentives and stock options). This would also include the basic tools to do the job (i.e., telephone, computer, lighting, heat, office space, etc.).

The next level within Maslow’s triangle relates to safety needs. Within Maslow’s world, this relates to feeling secure in its most literal sense. In our healthy workplace, safety includes a sense of both physical and emotional well-being. “Safety” at work is achieved at least in part by having policies, documentation and communication that formalizes arrangements that promote security and understanding.

More specifically, physical safety includes Workplace Safety and Insurance Board coverage, appropriate benefits and retirement programs, ergonomic workstations, properly functioning elevators, fire drills and security in both the building and parking areas.

Emotional safety in the workplace involves trusting your colleagues, being honest with each other and feeling cared

for through effective leadership and mentoring. Although an employer cannot guarantee long-term security, a well-communicated and documented performance measurement system is part and parcel of safety.

The third level is social needs. Maslow would have considered family and friends in this category, but socialization at work and feeling part of the team is very much part of a healthy workplace. Colleague collegiality, being included in meetings and copied on emails that relate to the work you do are part of socialization at work. Knowing the personal side of the people with whom you work, sharing stories of weekend activities and going for a coffee to discuss workplace problems or just vent is also very much part of a healthy workplace.

The fourth level encompasses the need for esteem. Maslow would have positioned this as leadership — who rules the clan. In the office, this includes status, position, title and promotion. As well, this category of need relates to responsibility and authority. Esteem needs are manifested in how a person is treated: where they sit, the size of their office, executive perks, whether or not

they have a dedicated assistant and to what extent their opinion is asked for and then acted on. Being involved in decision making is part of a healthy workplace for people who have needs at this level.

The top parts of the triangle for Maslow are self-actualization and spirituality. In the workplace this might apply to passion for the job or the creativity brought to the role. This could also include vision. It's the part of a healthy workplace that encourages an employee to exceed expectations because high quality work is fulfilling deeply held personal needs — well beyond the need to earn enough money to pay the mortgage.

A “healthy workplace” is a community in and of itself. The members of that community (the employees) need to be personally fulfilled in order to meet the expectations of their employer. They need to be physically comfortable, feel safe, have positive social interactions, feel good about themselves and ultimately feel that they are contributing to the greater good.

Not every employee will require all five levels to be met to be fulfilled in the work and hence feel they have a “healthy workplace.” Some just need to be paid adequately and have the tools and support to get the job done. Others have social needs, and if those are met, they are happy. As we move up the pyramid, fewer employees have requirements at the upper two levels of need — or put another way, the upper levels of need may look very different among different people. An employer endeavouring to provide a “healthy workplace” needs to be sensitive to these differences.

“Excellent” employees

Reliability, commitment and integrity are all hallmarks of an excellent employee. Some employees can be more effective working on their own terms — at a location of their own choice or at times that suit their biological clock or work-life balance. The bottom line is that when the employer needs the employee to be available, he is there.

He also understands his job and what needs to be done. When his role or responsibilities are unclear, the excellent employee has the awareness and confidence to ask the right questions of the right people. He is not spending time on activities that are unproductive or unrelated to the job at hand. All deadlines and financial targets are met.

The job is always done well, and frequently expectations are exceeded. This can mean many things from going beyond the call of duty to mentoring other associates to approaching each day with a sense of humour that helps everyone over the rough spots.

Definition and role of health

Good health means different things to different people. However, we can more easily describe desirable outcomes from which good health might be a contributor. In this respect, the “healthy” employee may be considered an engaged employee.

Engaged employees are attentive, focused and committed. They care about their work and their work environment. They also care about others: colleagues, managers, customers and suppliers. The healthy employee is also alert to opportunities and risks. Health is not about how you look or how much you weigh. In the corporate context, it's about how you feel about the job and the role you play in that job. No employer should be held responsible for facilitating individual employee health.

Employers should, however, be responsible for encouraging positive business outcomes that arise from creating healthy work environments. Both the tangible and intangible elements of total remuneration need to be legitimately considered, articulated, communicated and valued for the desirable business outcomes to be realized.

In brief, tangible remuneration is easily quantifiably measured and usually has a monetary value. Examples of tangible remuneration are base pay, bonus, group and retirement benefits. If tangible remuneration is measurable, usually with a mon-

etary value, then it follows that intangible remuneration is not easily measurable and doesn't usually have a monetary value. Examples of intangible remuneration include career growth opportunities, mentoring and leadership.

Promoting a healthy environment

So, can employee excellence and a healthy environment be promoted?

Think about cooking spaghetti. One way to check whether spaghetti is cooked or not is to throw a piece or two enthusiastically against the wall. If it sticks, the spaghetti is cooked. If it slips down the wall, it is not done yet.

By providing subsidized fitness club memberships, lunchtime education sessions and an EAP, an organization may think it is doing all the right things to create a healthy work environment. However, without a focused strategy, the handful of tactics is just like throwing spaghetti against the wall. There is no way to tell what will stick.

To foster excellence and a healthy workplace, an employer needs to ensure that employees have the tools and training to do their jobs. They must also benchmark both tangible and intangible rewards against the market and what their employees actually value. Then programs can be developed that both support business objectives and employee needs.

The needs discussed earlier in the context of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the concepts discussed above that relate to excellence, health and engagement are the elements that comprise a healthy workplace. Employers need to understand what makes employees tick — and at what level — and then target the components of the work experience to meet those needs. The result will be a healthy work environment in which excellent, engaged employees can flourish. — E.B.N.C.

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