



Genuine Contact™

...providing a holistic approach to organizational success

Building Healthy Workplaces with the Genuine Contact™ Program

Healthy workplaces are a hot topic nationally in Canada and the “next big idea” in organizational development. In 2000, Canada’s Healthy Workplace Week was launched to remind Canadian businesses about the increasing urgency to address workplace health and the positive effects that healthy workplaces can have. Workplace health has even received attention from the World Health Organization (WHO) because of the impact on the health of communities.

Why is there so much attention? The human and economic costs of unhealthy workplaces are great. The ripple effect has been felt throughout society on families, businesses, and the health care system. WHO has declared job stress a worldwide epidemic. Unhealthy workplaces can create excessive stress, especially in organizational climates that devalue or ignore basic human needs (Wilson, 2003). Sustained long-term stress changes brain chemistry and affects the body’s ability to fight infection and disease. Resulting illness, disability and death affect family relationships and economic well-being. Analysts estimate the total cost of unhealthy workplaces to Canadian employers is in the billions annually. About 20 percent of payroll of a typical company goes towards stress-related problems like absenteeism, disability leaves and counselling, medication and accidents, (Riga, 2006). According to Health Canada, the direct costs (paying absent workers) and indirect costs (training replacements) of work-life stress to Canadian business is \$4.5- \$10 billion annually (Riga). The burden of illnesses also stresses publicly funded health care systems and private insurers. Unhealthy workplaces have been linked to low productivity (Lowe, 2003), which can affect sustainable economic development in communities and countries (WHO, 1999).

Despite the extensive research that demonstrates the benefits of healthy workplaces for individuals, for the organization and the bottom line, few organizations have developed a comprehensive strategy to address workplace health. I recently attended a nursing leadership conference where researchers presented their study that found the factors that influence quality of worklife in health care had not changed in the last 10 years, yet few organizations have been successful in integrating these ingredients (Dhoot, 2005). So why is that? Although there is much information about WHAT needs to be done, there is much to learn about HOW to get there. There is reluctance to invest the time, financial and human resources required to achieve healthy workplaces because of the time it takes (several years) to see a return on investment, even though it can range from \$1.64 to more than \$8.00 per dollar spent¹.

¹ <http://www.nwohealthworks.org/facts.php>

“A healthy workplace is a place where everyone works together to achieve an agreed vision for the health and well being of workers and the surrounding community.

It provides all members of the workforce with physical, psychological, social and organizational conditions that protect and promote health & safety.

It enables managers and workers to increase control over their own health and to improve it, and to become more energetic, positive and contented. In return, the workforce is more stable, committed and productive.”

WHO, 1999, p. 5

While healthy workplace strategies have evolved considerably since the 1970's emphasis on occupational hygiene and safety, current healthy workplace strategies are directed at individuals through lifestyle and wellness programs and health and safety training programs. While important, they are only part of the equation. It is now recognized that there is a third element that must be attended to: the underlying organizational factors and culture that support health of individuals and the organizations (Lowe, 2004). This goes beyond environments that are free of

hazards, or training people in safe work practices. What Lowe refers to is working with the deeper essence of the organization, and involves key ingredients like “leadership that values employees as key assets, supportive supervision at all levels, employee participation, job control, communication, opportunities to learn, and a culture that gives priority to work-life balance and individual wellness” (p.3). The concept of healthy workplaces has evolved to that of healthy organizations.

Working with the Genuine Contact™ Program taps into and attunes organizations to that deeper essence and works with the multiple dimensions that contribute to organizational health. The program builds internal capacity to achieve and sustain health and balance by offering processes, tools, structures and supports that can help organizations to develop an operating system that allows ongoing evolution of a healthy organization.

WHO (1999) identified the determinants of worker's health in the workplace that mirror the determinants of health in the community: the environment and working conditions, the organization and culture, work groups, and work styles and practices. Working with the Genuine Contact™ Program in organizations can positively impact each determinant.

1. Environment and Working Conditions

Lack of involvement in decision-making is one factor that contributes to a negative psychosocial environment. The Genuine Contact™ Program uses highly participative meeting methodologies that tap into the collective wisdom and potential of individuals and the organization as a whole. The processes engage the passion and creativity of people and encourage responsibility and action, resulting in innovative and creative solutions to issues related to work environment and working conditions. The Program works with change at the scale of the whole, promoting join-in at the beginning rather than buy-in after the fact. As a consequence, there is usually faster uptake and acceptance of new ways of being and doing.

2. Organization and Culture

Improving workplace health depends almost entirely on leadership priorities and decisions. The first step is to determine the will of leaders and the organization to achieve health and balance. The Genuine Contact™ Program helps organizations to explore the benefits of and the will to achieve health and balance. It provides them with the tools and frameworks to “diagnose” the current state of health and to develop strategies to achieve and sustain organizational health. These tools raise consciousness of and work with the deep essence

of the organization including purpose, values, assumptions, leadership, vision, community, management and relationships. The emphasis is on a deep fix rather than a quick fix. Using the tools, the organization can build a comprehensive organizational strategy for achieving and sustaining organizational health and the processes for achieving results.

3. Workgroups

Relationships and interactions with co-workers are the major source of stress in workplaces. Healthy organizations are founded on right relationships with self, others, the collective and the divine. The Genuine Contact Program enables people to achieve “genuine contact” at all levels through reflection and meaningful dialogue. The program builds community and fosters team work, effective communication and collaboration while working together on key business issues. It helps to minimize conflicts that create a negative psychosocial environment and provides tools to resolve conflicts that do arise.

4. Work Style and Practices

The Genuine Contact Program engages the whole person: mental, emotional, spiritual and physical. Working with the program assists individuals and the collective to work with their “deeper source” (Sharmer, 2005) - purpose, assumptions, values and beliefs that guides actions, individuals and work groups, which facilitates transformational change. Mentoring, coaching and workshops are provided to support individuals and the organization to achieve health and balance.

Achieving organizational health is a continuous process. The program does not superimpose a model or structure, but rather provides the underpinnings and frameworks for co-creating healthy workplace strategies that are customized to the organization. It provides a healthy and balanced foundation or “operating system” for the organization to work from.

The ingredients and benefits of a healthy organization are clear. There is now evidence that is compelling organizations to invest the time and resources to address workplace health. The Genuine Contact™ Program provides a HOW to get there - a holistic approach that aligns the process for achieving health with healthy workplace characteristics.

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