



The Case for Workplace Health

Encouraging leadership key to healthy workplace

BY GRAHAM S. LOWE

A growing number of employers are searching for solutions to rising health and disability benefits costs. This has generated much rhetoric about the need to create healthier workplaces. However, action has been slower in coming.

It's not that the current approach to workplace health isn't paying off. On the contrary, there is a sound economic case for comprehensive workplace health promotion. U.S. research shows that comprehensive workplace health promotion programs can reduce employee health risk factors, reduce employers' healthcare costs and improve productivity.

Yet, most of the productivity gain is through reduced absenteeism. Indeed, low absenteeism rates have a dark side: presenteeism. This is the stressed-out or overworked employee who is present but not fully contributing. So managers need to be guided by a vision of an environment in which employees thrive and are highly motivated to contribute their best.

We can speed up progress toward this vision by thinking more strategically about healthy workplaces. Business success depends on enabling and supporting employees to be physically, mentally, emotionally and socially healthy and well. The pillars of a healthy workplace are culture, relationships and resources. A healthy culture values respect and fairness. Employees trust each other, and management, and are committed to a shared vision and mission. They feel challenged but not overworked, have the resources they need to learn and contribute, and are recognized for their work. At all levels, employees feel they have ownership of their jobs and a voice in decisions. Open

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and honest two-way communication is vital. And supervisors actively support their staff to develop their talents, to collaborate, and to have a healthy and balanced life.

In every sector of the economy, we can find employers that have implemented this model. And in large multi-site organizations, a few units will be leading the way to health and productivity—the challenge is to identify and learn from them.

Consider these three shining lights:

Stora Enso is an integrated forest-products company headquartered in Finland. Its major challenge is creating a performance culture among

encourages employees to try new things and yet doesn't penalize them for taking chances, and a culture that cares about employees' personal and professional growth." SAS has been on *Fortune* magazine's "100 best companies to work for in America" list for eight consecutive years. SAS also has created a robust accountability framework using metrics and on-going employee feedback.

Trillium Health Centre, in Mississauga, Ontario, has set the explicit goal of creating and maintaining healthy workplaces. Trillium emphasizes individual leadership and achieves an environment for innovation by dispensing with command-

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45,000 employees in 40 countries. Developing a highly skilled, motivated and healthy workforce is a strategic priority. Regular Web-based surveys monitor workplace culture, employee satisfaction and well-being, and management practices to ensure they support these goals. This complements rigorous safety practices. Survey results are reported to all work units and accountability is through action plans, targeted improvements and a performance-based reward system for managers.

At the SAS Institute, a U.S.-based leader in business intelligence software, innovation and business growth are built on long-term relationships. As SAS President and CEO Jim Goodnight explains, "We've worked hard to create a corporate culture that is based on trust between our employees and the company, a culture that rewards innovation,

and-control hierarchies, empowering people to make decisions and take ownership for them. This creates satisfying and meaningful work—which promotes wellness—and excellence in patient care. Like Stora Enso and SAS, accountability is achieved through employee surveys and unit-level action plans.

These organizations have deeply rooted cultures based on a virtuous connection between how employees are treated and business success. Following distinct paths and using different language, each provides the same compelling case for healthy workplaces: supporting people in healthy environments is the best way to excel in meeting client, patient and customer needs. ■

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