



Overcoming Obstacles... to a Healthy Workplace!

by CLAUDETTE E. S. COOMBS

What prevents a workplace from being healthy? The physical factors of air quality, space, lighting and electrical or barrier hazards are well known obstacles to building a healthy workplace. Although difficult to remediate, solutions can eventually be implemented. It's often the other sources of ill health, including interpersonal interactions, which may appear much more sinister and difficult to address!

Relationships – Conflict among teachers, between support staff and teachers, or between teachers and administrators is often a source of distress. If left unresolved, conflict can have serious implications for the functioning of the school and the health of individuals involved. Unfortunately, conflict tends to contaminate an environment. The atmosphere becomes negative, unity is dissolved and any chance of harmony is lost. This is definitely not the space in which anyone would choose to work!

Bullying – If you thought bullying was a school issue only relating to students, then you might be enlightened to learn that it occurs all too frequently in the staff room as well. This corrupt relationship exists where there is a misuse of the imbalance in power or authority. Children on the playground use language, size or group unity to threaten isolation, physical harm or social rejection. The natural power imbalance which occurs between the administration and staff at any school creates an environment where misuse of authority can prevail. In the school hierarchy a position of authority, inside knowledge or personal connections can be used to threaten undesirable consequences or control behaviour. Colleagues also use loud or intimidating behaviour, threat of “making a scene” or physical presence and traits to manipulate others. The inexperienced, untenured or accommodating teachers are most often the targets.

Sarcasm – People bring their own hurts to the workplace and instead of dealing with them in a healthy manner, may project feeling through hurtful communication patterns. The use of sarcasm is an

accepted mode of interaction in some staff rooms, yet poses risks to those engaging in, or subjected to, this unhealthy behaviour.

It is no surprise that Respectful Workplace Programs are appearing throughout the corporate world. A workplace that does not show concern for its employees suffers in productivity, staff turnover and work absenteeism. However, the fall out from an emotionally unhealthy workplace can also be the tragedy we hear about in the news!

How can an unhealthy workplace be transformed?

Several steps must be in place to successfully change the health of a workplace. The first is awareness at all levels. Employers and employees must recognize the symptoms and must see the negative impact. A next step is the belief that change is possible and despite growing pains, making the effort would be worth it. All must believe that a different situation would be better for themselves. If we have become entrenched in a system of acting and reacting, this is seen as a norm and creating change may not be considered. We are sometimes so busy struggling to survive that we don't have the resources to challenge the existing status. Or, we may have faced too many unsuccessful challenges and have become disillusioned. However, once we believe that constructive change is possible, to make it a reality we develop a workable action plan. Set a goal with specific objectives which serve as progress indicators. Define how the objectives will be fulfilled, i.e., “who does what with specified resources by a set time”. Clearly stated, goals and objectives are easier to achieve. The action plan should include a component on policy and procedures, skills development and progress evaluation. The action plan should provide a working structure yet have enough flexibility to allow revision.

Although school districts may establish some rules and guidelines which take into account teacher life balance and issues, the school has a great deal of autonomy in developing its own supportive culture.

The policy and procedures component should develop and supply supportive Policies, Programs, and Practices, including a protocol for dealing with conflict and issues of concern. A Policy Manual should be accessible to all staff and should cover any anticipated school issue. When gaps are identified, staff should be involved in developing appropriate protocol. Ensuring that all staff know school expectations and the consequences of non-compliance will prevent needless dissension over the consistent enforcement of school policies. When reflecting on how teachers are expected to interact with each other, the NLTA Code of Ethics is a good place to look.

The skills development component should emphasize a variety of areas. These include: understanding appropriate communication behaviours (listening, assertiveness, impact of body language, saying No); improving organizational abilities in time and resource management (set priorities, eliminate wastage, decrease interruptions, schedule); refining conflict resolution techniques; and promoting team building.

The action plan should be designed to allow for reviewing progress and modifying the initial plan to incorporate revisions which would better serve the school and its staff. This review component could include the appropriate use of the School Development Committee to oversee the implementation and monitoring of a healthy workplace plan. It could devise indicators to measure aspects including: physical structure, organizational protocol, staff development and flexibility, safety and respect. Student health is also a school factor and issues such as nutrition, activity, safety and tolerance may be combined with the overall workplace plan.

Encouraging a Healthy Workforce

This is the role of all individuals at the worksite. Adopting a positive, supportive attitude goes a long way in promoting a healthy working environment. A common staff complaint is the feeling of not being appreciated, valued or respected by colleagues or by administrators. To correct this perception, teachers need to see action, not just hear the words, although words of encouragement should be given at every reasonable opportunity. Value can be shown by encouraging input at staff meetings, in school development, on participation for “voluntary” activities such as committees and extra curricular and by having influence in decision making so that personal experience is heard and considered.

Teachers comment that even when a situation cannot immediately be changed, difficult days, limited resources or cramped space can be handled if they know that there is hope of a change (even if

it is next year) and if their administrators show an empathetic attitude. On the contrary, when administrators express an attitude of “learn to live with it”, the result on staff is frustration, increased resentment and anger, increased sick leave use and decreased functioning and overall productivity. It is obvious that much can be achieved through the interest and strength of a supportive administrator.

We know that we respond differently to students who are resourceful, considerate and diligent compared to those who are obstinate, abrasive and irresponsible. Equally so, we invite a different reaction to ourselves, depending on how we behave and are perceived. Daily we make choices which affect our health. We can create a healthy workplace by choosing to be proactive in initiating positive change.

...knowing a problem exists and doing nothing about it, is not an acceptable pathway to a healthy workplace.

Claudette Coombs is a Coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for teachers. For confidential assistance contact Claudette Coombs (ext. 242) or Marie Wall (ext. 265).