



Wellness is... a Healthy Workplace!

by CLAUDETTE E. S. COOMBS

Wellness is a uniquely personal state of existence. It encompasses all avenues of our lives and all components of our being. The intimate, personal side of wellness is determined by our internal resources and how we respond to external stressors. The societal aspect of wellness is a function of our interactions with environmental challenges. To be healthy we must start by taking responsibility for how we live our lives. Although these lifestyle choices influence our capacity for health, that capacity is realized at a level according to supports we experience in our external environments.

What makes a workplace healthy?

We naturally think about the facility and its physical conditions. Those things are very important and are never more noticeable than when we have lost them. However, if we have the basics, there are more significant contributors to our workplace health. According to research, interpersonal relationships actually determine how we interpret the health of our workplace. Being treated with respect is the number one characteristic ranked by 2,500 Canadian employees in a March 2000 survey reported in the *National Journal of Human Resource Management*. Personal and social aspects of work were considered more significant than economic benefits or flexible schedules. The notable implication of this data is that when employee expectations are not met, there is job dissatisfaction. Other studies indicate that we are less satisfied with our jobs when we feel that we have no voice in what happens, when our efforts are not recognized and when we feel unfairly treated. When we are dissatisfied we tend to feel less committed, miss more time from work, experience more health complications and have diminished performance, productivity and sense of accomplishment. This has a negative impact on the system and causes problems due to low staff morale, higher rates of absenteeism or

presenteeism (going to work disillusioned or unwell) and greater turn-over of staff. On the personal side, the impact of job dissatisfaction affects our quality of life, family or home relationships and our health. Working harder and longer does not translate into the achievement of better results or greater productivity. Instead, it often means that staff are at high risk of, or already experiencing, negative health consequences and may have succumbed to the coping technique of presenteeism.

How does a healthy workplace benefit us?

It isn't difficult to see how a healthy workplace can benefit not only the specific workers and employer, but also society in general. Avoiding unhealthy complications is a goal which also encourages optimal performance and productivity. Generating a respectful, positive and supportive work culture which supports work-life balance in policy, program and practice makes good sense all the way around.

Fitting this idea into the school setting translates into an environment where there is consciousness and recognition of issues affecting staff and an effort to minimize the negative impact while strengthening the necessary supports. This gives us a better sense of job fulfillment and reduces personal and professional stressors, thereby relieving some of the home pressure that ultimately creates a happier, healthier teacher. Of course the domino effect ensures that this teacher is then better able to deal effectively with classroom challenges, and that filters down to more positive interactions with students.

To achieve these desirable and much coveted results, a school must have good leadership and a strong, health-conscious, organizational foundation.

What makes good workplace leadership?

The work culture often corresponds to the values of the leadership. When respect, recognition, compassion, trust, commitment, clear expectations and fairness are

expressed and reinforced by those who set and administer the organizational policy, we can expect that employees will adopt a similar interaction style. There are many things beyond the control of the teacher and the administrator, but research indicates that despite difficult work environments, the quality of our work lives can be considerably enhanced by positive employment relationships. Sometimes just taking the time to listen and acknowledge the impact of workload demands is enough for teachers to feel that they are appreciated. This can be enough to give the boost we need to try to improve the system while we continue working through it. **Caution:** Listening should not ever be just an opportunity for teachers to vent frustrations without also taking responsibility to be constructive. We daily face situations that we are incapable of individually changing, whether that is poverty or a monumental system that doesn't seem to be working for us "today". That does not justify a complacent resignation to the status quo and should not prevent us from creatively seeking solutions on our local scale. Good leadership inspires this process in an environment where positive change is always encouraged.

What can we do to improve the system?

Working as a team within the school setting we can be committed to constructing a physical and social environment that promotes health. While appreciating the human qualities contributing to workplace success, we can ensure that we act on things under our control or influence. As teachers we must:

- Use available resources and opportunities (technology, PD days, personal interviews) to enhance and use skills that support a healthy approach to life.
- Find or create opportunities to engage in physical and mental exercise.
- Listen and communicate clear expectations.

As administrators we have even more responsibility in setting the tone and climate around the school. It is also a critical duty to focus on people. When staff feel respected, valued and supported they are much more willing, and able, to function at peak performance, even under chaotic or less than desirable conditions. To encourage the development and maintenance of a healthy workplace we must:

- Introduce healthy workplace strategies, as part of the School Development Process which can build a road map to health.
- Recognize and support staff. Try to know, understand and accommodate factors, such as health and family issues, which can have a negative impact on individuals.
- Wherever possible, encourage participation in decisions affecting teachers.

- Work with staff to identify workplace areas needing improvement, healthy practices to incorporate into daily school life and achievable health strategies which use current, or easily obtained, resources.
- Communicate carefully, clearly and concisely.

We need to support each other in achieving our common goal. Above all, recognize and set our own limits. Until we care for ourselves, we are not able to be a positive example nor have the resources left to meet others' needs. Airlines have a good reason for telling passengers to put on their own masks before helping others... no matter how tempting it is to try otherwise!

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