



*How to Spend 60% of Your  
Waking Hours in a Healthy Environment*

# Create a Healthy Workplace

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A healthy workplace can do wonders for job satisfaction, productivity and general well-being. Since most employees spend about 60% of their waking hours at work, we all share the responsibility, and can reap the benefits, of making a “healthy workplace” our reality! Creating a healthy work environment is a challenge well worth the joint effort and specific actions required to achieve our goal.

Each of us would be fortunate to work in a pleasant environment that runs smoothly, enables us to get the job done without too many obstacles or too much stress and allows us to have a personal life. But such a utopia does not happen by chance.

Creating our desired healthy work environment is dependant upon having the necessary structures and people to support it. This means providing safe and healthy facilities; policies which promote and enable healthy functioning; and qualified, engaged leaders. Even with such conditions in place, there is still the possibility that the workplace might not lend itself to providing or protecting optimal health. One other crucial ingredient is a health-conscious staff. Teachers need to know how to support a healthy workplace and must then engage in behaviours which sustain it.

## **The STRUCTURES**

Creating the structures which facilitate advantageous working conditions is the first step in establishing a healthy workplace and workforce. Without the tools, knowledge and regulations, it is unlikely that good intentions and healthy behaviours will prevail.

The Department of Education and School Boards, supported by school administrative personnel, take a primary role in creating the fundamentals of a supportive environment. The underlying curriculum resources and guidelines must be comprehensive and useable with accessible personnel. The facility, policies and job descriptions must be conducive to physically and psychologically healthy working conditions. Clean air, a respectful workplace culture,

reasonable job requirements and adequate resources are examples of conditions which are necessary foundations for a healthy workplace.

To achieve maximum productivity and health benefits, it is important to create an atmosphere which encourages loyalty to the education system and to each other. When teachers believe in the system, trust the leaders and are given the support and resources needed to perform their jobs, they are willing to invest more of themselves in achieving success within the organization. Beware, because the converse is also true. If any of the conditions are missing, teachers are wary of giving more to a system which is not perceived to be reciprocating the generosity.

Maintaining a committed staff depends on teachers being satisfied with the balance between their personal contribution and the combination of benefits and compensation they receive. Giving personal or family time, privacy and a lot of energy must be in exchange for a combination of desirable job benefits, to be considered a reasonable trade! While we are all familiar with the sacrifices, we also acknowledge the benefits of financial compensation, sense of reward, personal gratification, professional fulfilment and career development. Having a “good contract”, receiving relevant PD sessions, being recognized during periods of overload, being accommodated for personal issues and actually experiencing joy in the work are all reasons that teachers remain committed to their profession and value the system in which they work.

The NLTA, as a professional association, works toward ensuring teacher benefits, fair working conditions, appropriate compensation, appropriate/pertinent professional development opportunities and takes a practical interest in teacher health. This is also an important step for establishing the foundations for teacher well-being in a healthy workplace. Rushing off to Alberta because the jobs don't currently exist here is an unfortunate reality for many

Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. However, it should not be an option that is considered due to an unsatisfactory work environment.

### The DIRECTION

School administrators, including principals, vice principals and department heads are the front line people whose skills and approach can encourage, or discourage, a positive work culture. Great leadership and interpersonal skills make a difference in any workplace setting. The ability to set meaningful goals, motivate others to achieve and instill a sense of camaraderie are key leadership qualities.

Enhancing and using personal skills in managing people will help to create an emotionally secure work environment for staff. This sets an example for respectful interactions. Potential conflict can be avoided when issues are recognized and addressed early. Fear, resentment, confusion and heightened stress are minimized by promoting ease of communication through clear direction, expectations and consequences in a climate of fair treatment. Negativity and apathy can be replaced with optimism and engagement when leaders make it a priority to learn and practice the necessary people management skills.

Basic steps for administrators include:

1. Create a team approach to running the school. Within the school, ultimate responsibility rests with the administration. However, teachers can be part of the planning and the process and be kept informed about things that will impact them. This sets an atmosphere of trust and support which promotes better working relationships and more effective operations within the school.
2. Develop a shared vision of education, school goals, mutually agreeable methods and a reasonable action plan to achieve them. When there is disagreement in details, focus on the common goals and overall vision of a healthy school for all. Clearly communicated expectations and consequences along with open communications encourages staff participation, questions, a common understanding and a sense of "being in this together". Opportunities to share, offer input, receive recognition, engage in meaningful decision-making and create change go a long way in ensuring that individuals respond to needs and tasks are performed as planned.
3. Match teachers according to interests, personality and ability for extra curricular requests and in areas of training and competence for committee and job assignments. Link new and seasoned teachers to provide support and rejuvenate interest and enthusiasm. Don't force a match that isn't working. It's not an efficient use of resources and will create disharmony.

Whenever possible and appropriate, allow flexibility and accommodate personal needs or preferences. This awareness of the teacher shows a consideration which further develops trust in the leadership.

4. Provide time for social contact. This shows that you value each individual as a person, not just as a teaching machine. Modest actions can result in substantial emotional payoff. Simple suggestions for sharing our human side at work include: holding a pot luck; having a birthday cake in the staff room to celebrate all the birthdays that month; starting a school tradition of an annual hobby display or seasonal dress-up day; making a congratulatory announcement to recognize a "Masters" graduation; or offering an expression of empathy or condolences on a personal loss.

When people get to know each other they are more aware of factors which influence personal behaviour and express greater tolerance and understanding of differences. They are more likely to interpret an occasional affront as unintentional rather than deliberate and thereby prevent much of the potential for negativity among staff.

Staff choices and behaviours reflect a significant contribution to a healthy workplace. Positive attitudes set the tone for productive work interactions and organizational success. We have all experienced situations of interpersonal or functional challenges in which we function more, and at times less, adeptly. Independent of the situation, success often depends on the attitudes and the skills of those involved. The skills we can learn but the attitude we choose!

Make the effort to accept colleagues. That doesn't mean that you have to be best friends. You don't even have to like them! You certainly don't have to like everything they do! But it is beneficial to try to understand their stressors and acknowledge their strengths. Focusing on a colleague's annoying habits or traits could inhibit a valuable sharing or learning process. Each person has arrived at this point with different experiences, so each person also has different skills and knowledge to bring to challenging situations.

Working together in a spirit of cooperation can lead to a healthier work environment. Access resources which improve the place where you spend most of your available time and energy. Your health is the reward!

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