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Health: A Workplace Leadership Issue for the 21st Century?

Personal, family, community and organizational health are increasingly significant concerns for our society. Healthcare costs are increasing and consume a large portion of most provincial budgets. For example, in Nova Scotia, the Department of Health budget is about 41% of the province's budget (2010 – 2011).

In general, the health of Canadian adults in the areas of incidence of high blood pressure, waist circumference and overall fitness level has deteriorated between 1981 and 2009 (Exchange 2010).

There are many reasons for this: an aging population, the emergence of the boomer generation into times of higher health risks, and general inactivity.

So what does this have to do with managing or leading in your workplace? The case for paying attention to the health of your employees.

This article will focus on how employee health has an impact on the success of our organizations and will demonstrate simple and cost-effective interventions by leaders that significantly impact the health of employees, and therefore the success of our businesses.

Look at some health realities.

Excess weight. BMI (Body Mass Index) is a measure of body fat based on height and weight. A BMI of 25+ is considered overweight and 30+ is considered obese (Health Canada). Research tells us that:

- The association between injury and obesity is related to fatigue, sleepiness, physical limitations and ergonomics. Obese workers' use of medications due to their chronic conditions can also increase the risk of injury. In addition, it is possible that personal protective equipment, such as gloves and eye goggles, is less likely to be used by obese workers due to lack of comfort, fit or availability (Park, 2009).
- A recent study reported a linear relationship between BMI and rate of injury claims (Ostbye, et al., 2007).
- Overweight employees were more likely to 'cost' more than other workers due to higher injury claims (Makrides, et al., 2010).
- Obese women are twice as likely to be injured at work (Health Canada, 2009).

- Obesity, especially for women, may have a negative impact on workers more often through presenteeism (being at work but unproductive) rather than absenteeism (Park, 2009).

Diabetes affects 2.5 million Canadians today and is projected to impact 3.7 million by 2020. About 90% of diabetics have Type 2, which is usually a consequence of obesity, inactivity, poor diet and aging. Canada's changing ethnic makeup (diabetes rates vary by ethnicity) also provides an upward push to this trend. If current trends continue, the economic burden of the disease will climb to \$16.9 billion in the next decade, up from \$12.2 billion today (Picard, 2009).

Cardiovascular disease is a health reality that affects the lives of about 80% of Canadians. High blood pressure is a well-known factor in these diseases - diseases that are mostly preventable. The Conference Board of Canada (2009) states that addressing the risk factors related to cardiovascular disease would have a significant economic impact. A recent study reported that 'flu vaccination could be associated with a reduction in the risk of heart attack' (Pearce, 2010).

Mental health concerns affect about 20% of Canadians. Research indicates that only 50% of those affected seek help for the issues and that only 33% receive the treatment they need (Lieberman 2010). The Canadian Mental Health Association says that mental health costs in Canada are \$51 billion annually (Vancouver Mental Health Summit, 2009). Managers can mitigate the impact of mental health issues by working towards a psychologically safe workplace (Dowden, 2010).

None of us can hide from the need to address health concerns.

THE BUSINESS CASE

There is significant evidence of the impact of poor employee health on the bottom line:

- Brooker, et al. (1998) estimated that Canadian

employers incur between \$10 billion and \$20 billion in annual disability related costs.

- The Public Health Agency of Canada (2007) estimates the indirect costs (time lost due to long-term and short-term disabilities and the present value of future productivity due to premature death and illness) at an economic value of \$75.5 billion.
- In 2008, Great West Life reported that mental health disorders in the workplace cost Canadian companies about 14% of their net annual profits and up to \$16 billion annually.
- The Canadian Breast Cancer Network released a groundbreaking report on May 28, 2010. *Breast Cancer: Economic Impact and Labour Force Re-Entry* reports findings from a survey of 446 Canadians with breast cancer, of whom 80% experienced a financial impact, 16 % had their jobs terminated, and 12% were unable to return to their previous job at the same title and salary.

So what can leaders/managers/employers do to support their employees in maintaining or improving their health and to lessen the effect of health issues on their business?

It is imperative that, as authority figures, we accept our role as one of influence in our workplace. Most employees want to see visible and authentic direction from management. Promoting a healthy workplace is a prime opportunity for leadership action that is visible, encouraging, challenging and proactive. Our actions need to have integrity.

We need to practice what we preach and praise the large and small victories in our employees. The key is that we act to create an environment where healthy behaviours are recognized, respect for others is promoted, issues are addressed, unsafe work practices are not tolerated and success is celebrated.

Some low cost actions that can make a difference in the health of your employees are:

- Encouraging and supporting employees to get a flu shot - easy and not costly.
- Encourage employees to wash their hands on a regular basis. Provide hand sanitizer. These actions can reduce the spread of germs that can cause employees to lose time at work.
- Encourage employees to use stairs instead of elevators.
- Hold a 'biggest loser' contest where the person or team that loses the most weight in a defined period wins a prize.
- Make sure that your Employee Benefits cover the basic health costs and are flexible for employees.
- Investigate a 'health spending account' for your company (www.chsa.ca).

- Develop and promote a Code of Conduct and Harassment Policy to name and enhance the interpersonal norms within your company. Hold regular diversity events to help everyone understand and appreciate the heritage and values of co-workers.
- Ensure that your Safety Policy and Practices promote a safety culture.
- Provide regular education sessions on health issues. In many places, service providers and interest groups will provide resource people at no charge.
- Promote a smoke-free workplace.
- Train managers and supervisors to notice early signs of health concerns.
- Address issues such as absenteeism, unsafe work practices and abuse early, and ensure that you promote a sense of each employee's accountability for his or her actions.

This brief article focused on the physical and mental health issues of Canadians and how managers, leaders and employers can create a 'healthy workplace' by focusing attention and solutions on these issues. There are many other facets of workplace health that can be addressed more fully: diversity, safety, generational challenges, and work-life balance, to name a few. The key is that as managers, leaders and employers we support our organizations by addressing these issues with proven solutions.

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