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Providing Supportive Workplace Conditions: The Foundation of a Healthy Organization

No one would be surprised to hear that employees who believe they are working in a supportive workplace are happier and less stressed. But, in today's climate of rapid change and increasing preoccupation with organizational survival, leaders often feel that sacrifices must be made. "We've all got to pitch in and work harder (or longer), boost our productivity, and make some unfortunate personal sacrifices... if we want to have a job tomorrow."

At first, this seems to make sense. After all, these are tough times for human service organizations, and we really are about the cause' – the essential work that drew us into whatever aspect of health, education, social services or community activity we have committed ourselves to. Over time, though, most people feel their resolve weakening, their energy flagging, and their willingness to make certain sacrifices, especially family-related, deteriorating. Pretty soon, we know we are in trouble on both an organizational and individual level. Almost overnight, the 'energy boost' that usually comes with tackling a major challenge or threat turns into an 'energy bust'. "What happened to all the enthusiasm, good will, and commitment to collaboration that promised so much in the early days of our 'change or die' initiatives? What can we do to recover what we've lost, and to support our people in their effort to create a sustainable future for themselves and our organization?"

One of the most important answers to the latter question – and we need to find answers soon if we are to avoid an unprecedented 'meltdown' in many Organizations – is also one of the simplest...

'Recognize that people have a life outside of work, and then take specific action to help them maintain it.'

Dr. Linda Duxbury (Carleton University, School of Business) and Dr. Christopher Higgins (University of Western Ontario, School of Business) have been studying work-family conflict for a number of years, and have surveyed more than 25,000 employees and managers in a wide range of public and private sector organizations. In a recent presentation, Dr. Duxbury shared their conclusions about certain fundamental tenets of organizational life that simply must change. She cites the following common beliefs that undermine efforts to make workplaces more supportive environments:

- people should keep their personal lives at home
- give people an inch and they'll take a mile
- equity means treating everyone exactly the same
- benefit programs can make people happier, but not more productive
- being 'present' equals being 'productive'
- hours at work equals performance

Such beliefs lead to management practices that focus on keeping people busy, monitoring attendance, and rewarding employees who are willing to make greater sacrifices than others to be 'present and accounted for.' One recent study, where couples were surveyed regarding work-family conflict in their workplaces, yielded disturbing results...

- most respondents felt there had been no work-related changes that made balancing work and personal/family life any easier
- 72% of couples reported that it had become more difficult to do so the
- chief factors that made it more difficult were:
 - heavy workloads and increasing demands
 - uncertainty about the future – job insecurity
 - motivation by fear – 'do or die mentality'

OK – but surely we're not suggesting that productivity and commitment should be less important than simply making employees happier. Of course not, but then again, feeling good about oneself, one's work, and one's employer obviously are important elements in defining a supportive workplace. Employees who described their workplaces as being supportive environments were asked to list the factors that made it so. Their responses clearly indicated that, in essence, it comes down to having managers and supervisors who...

- provide positive feedback and encouragement
- engage in open, two-way communication
- respect, mentor and empower employees
- recognize employees have a life outside of work, AND
- are offer support and flexibility to balance conflicting demands

Fair enough. There's no argument that treating employees well is a reasonable expectation, and will likely produce performance benefits to the organization. But will those gains be worth whatever productivity might be lost as a result of reducing increasing flexibility, and perhaps reducing certain expectations (shorter work hours, for example), in the workplace? Based on their research, Duxbury and Higgins would answer a resounding 'yes!' Drawing on findings from a number of large studies, each focusing on different aspects of work-family conflict, here are a list of benefits that come from creating supportive workplaces. As you can see, these benefits are just as important organizationally as they are to individual employees. Employees in supportive workplaces are...

- half as likely to feel highly stressed three times as likely to report job security
- 35% more likely to report job satisfaction
- 25% more likely to express high job commitment
- 40% more likely to agree with company policies
- 20 times as likely to trust management
- almost 6 times as likely to give upward feedback, AND
- are absent fewer days, less tardy
- work 12% more hours in an average week, and are
- 50% more likely to take some work home voluntarily

Conclusion

The obvious conclusion from the above – when we make it possible for people to 'have a life', there are benefits both at home and at work. Instead of the 'inevitable' trade-offs we often feel must be made, we create an important 'win-win' situation that makes work healthier for all. This is an especially important matter for human service organizations. If we are really serious about improving the health of those we serve, we should start by making our own workplaces healthier.