

WORKPLACE WELLNESS

I was pleased when Michelle invited me to join you this morning and share some thoughts on workplace wellness. While I believe that I am probably preaching to the choir, I am hoping that something that I say will deepen your commitment to what you are already doing.

We first began to talk about workplace wellness in the late 1800s and for the next 100 years that's all we did – talk. It wasn't until the late 1970s, that we actually did something about it.

I spent 35 years as a GP in Ridgetown and dealt with workplace unwellness on a daily basis. Often times, it seemed that the Emergency Department in Ridgetown was located at 68 Main Street, East and it was a rare day that we didn't have at least one walk-in from a local workplace.

My role was also that of a worker's advocate. I recall one episode, from many years ago, in which I was advocating for an employee with the supervisor of an HR department of a now-defunct Chatham industry. The supervisor became so exasperated with my obstinacy that he blurted out, "Dr. Button, you're almost as bad a Dr. Sugiyama!" He clearly thought that I would be stung by his criticism. But what he did not know was that Dr. Sugiyama was one of my heroes and being compared to him made me dig my heels in a little deeper.

Wellness. What is it? The World Health Organization defines wellness as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

And thus, it follows that workplace wellness, that state of complete physical, mental and social health in the workplace is the goal of promotion activities and organizational policies designed to promote and support healthy behaviours in the workplace and to improve health outcomes both in the workplace and beyond. The “beyond” here is critical because it goes a long way in determining what the employee brings to work each day. The ultimate goal is a healthy work-life balance.

Why bother about workplace wellness?

There is a moral case. It is important to remember that employees are potentially exposed to a wide range of health hazards or situations at work on a regular basis. It is morally incumbent on the employer to send workers home from work as healthy and whole as when they came to work.

But there is also a business case for workplace wellness. Balanced employees leave home issues at home and work issues at work. They feel a greater sense of ownership over their own lives. They feel more motivated and less stressed out at work, which increases company productivity and reduces the number of conflicts within the workplace – employee against employee and employee against management. And they do a better job.

An unhealthy workplace imposes high demands, allows little or no control or input, requires high or unreasonable effort and offers little reward. And what do we know of the impact of this unhealthy environment. Compared to the general population, these workers have 3 times the risk of heart disease, 2 times the risk of substance abuse, 3 times the risk of workplace

accidents, 3 times the risk of back pain, 5 times the risk of certain cancers, 3 times the risk of interpersonal conflicts within the workplace and beyond, 3 times the risk of infection and 3 times the risk of mental health problems.

An unhealthy workplace results in a high degree of work-related stress, which encourages the development of unhealthy lifestyle choices and behaviors – a “couch-potato” existence, obesity, tobacco, alcohol and drug abuse. These are the big 4 risk factors: inactivity, obesity, cigarette smoking and high alcohol intake. Workers with these lifestyle patterns have a 50% higher rate of absenteeism than those without. Their health care costs 2 – 3 times more than normal. Telus Mobility has estimated that it costs them \$2000 per employee per risk factor per year. Every cigarette smoker costs his or her employer an additional \$2500 annually. Obesity costs Canadian employers \$1.3 billion per year.

Unhealthy workplaces experience decreased employee satisfaction and commitment and thus decreased employee engagement, which results in higher turnover with its attendant costs. There is more workplace conflict resulting in more litigation. Absenteeism soars. It is estimated that absenteeism costs Canadian employers \$3.5 billion per year. Presenteeism – the employee is there but not there – also becomes a problem. In an unhealthy workplace more than 4% of the total payroll goes to fund disability benefits. The incidence of depression and mental illness is higher resulting in an estimated \$11 billion loss of productivity per year with a total cost of \$33 billion. And of course, in a potentially dangerous work environment, when your mind is elsewhere, accidents happen with alarming frequency.

All of these result in decreased productivity, higher costs, less profit and unhappy owners and shareholders. This is “Why Bother.” These numbers and the impacts of an unhealthy workplace on workers, employers, families and communities present a compelling argument for wellness programmes in the workplace both because they are morally right and they are good business.

And so, what’s to do?

I learned a lot of medicine working with my father. But I learned one HR practice that stands the test of time. We had the same 2 employees for 35 years. Early on, my father told me, “Happy employees make you money. Unhappy employees cost you money.” That in a nutshell is the bare bones of what to do. But let’s put some meat on these bones.

Being healthy at work means much more than getting a flu shot or washing your hands. Wellness in the workplace encompasses physical, mental, emotional, environmental, spiritual and occupational health. And none of these stands alone. They interact and intersect.

A healthy workplace integrates 3 intersecting pathways to achieve optimal health of its employees and its business – organizational culture, the physical environment and personal health resources and initiatives.

A business’s organizational culture is determined by the attitudes, values and beliefs that are demonstrated in the workplace on a daily basis that affect the total wellbeing of its employees.

The most important attributes of the organizational culture are respect and appreciation. Mary Kay Ash, founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics, said that people want 2 things more than sex and money: praise and recognition. Praise and recognition not just for contributions and achievements in the workplace but also for those in the community. Praise and recognition are so easy to give and cost nothing and go a long way to raising pride and self-esteem and all too often are overlooked.

There needs to be a commitment to balanced workloads and that commitment needs to become the reality. You need to foster the “we’re all in this together” attitude, in other words we’re a team of equals, as opposed to the resentment and “hard-done-by” attitude. This can be fostered by company outings and get-togethers and off-site team-building initiatives that enhance morale, build relationships outside of the workplace and encourage the development of a healthy dependency on each other and an “I’ve got your back” approach.

Many years ago, I sensed that the most important person in my office my receptionist/appointment maker, was discouraged and losing her enthusiasm. Her job was becoming just that, a job. I was worried we were going to lose her. We talked about it. Her job which at times could be frustrating was becoming more so. As well, she was feeling unchallenged. She felt as though she had come as far as she could. The upshot was that we encouraged and supported her to upgrade her IT skills, paid for her to do it and gave her the necessary time out of the office. She returned with the spring back in her step. And later when, we turned our entire office upside down by going paperless, she rolled with it. Opportunities for job enrichment and skills development need to be part of the culture.

The workplace needs to recognize and acknowledge that in many instances the employee knows how to do the job well and may know how to do it better. They need to be given the latitude to make decisions about their job and need to be involved in the decision-making process of the workplace.

Delta Hotels recently gave their staff more responsibility, accountability and authority, in other words, more say and more control of their work environment. Their employee turnover rate dropped to 20% as opposed to the industry standard of 50%.

Employers need to support the work-life balance. In a recent survey only 28% of workers believed that they enjoyed a good balance. Companies that have a reputation for encouraging work-life balance have become very attractive to workers and will draw a valuable pool of candidates for new openings. They tend to enjoy higher employee retention rates, which results in less time-consuming and costly training, more loyalty and a higher level of in-house expertise. Practices such as schedule flexibility and working from home, a policy that laptops don't go home at night or on weekends, child care services, time off for significant family events and support for community engagement that is relevant to the employee and the community can all encourage a work-life balance.

Clearly, the physical work environment is key to workers' wellness. Regular workplace inspections must be carried out to minimize chemical, musculoskeletal, electrical and machine hazards. Another workplace hazard that needs to be addressed is the toxic employee or the toxic manager or boss.

The final pathway consists of personal health programmes and initiatives: flextime for exercise particularly for those with sedentary jobs, fitness club or equipment subsidies, immunization clinics, smoking and weight loss programmes, talking about mental health, offering stress management training and quiet rooms that are calming spaces and not an employee lounge or cafeteria, healthy on-site food choices, use-it-or-lose-it vacation time and other health education programmes.

When you get right down to it, the key to workplace wellness is attitude. It involves an appreciation of the billions of dollars lost annually due to workplace unwellness and that a focus on wellness is the morally right thing to do. And you get to workplace wellness by ensuring a safe environment, by providing programmes, incentives and support for employees to “own” their health and by developing an organizational culture that respects and values its employees and walks that walk.

Remember happy employees will make you money.