

Celebrating Healthy Workplaces and Healthy Teams

October is Healthy Workplace month in Canada. In recognition of sustaining healthy workplaces, four consultants have presented their perspectives on engaging employees, fostering play at work, supporting culturally diversity and effectively managing conflict. Workplaces that focus on these four factors greatly increase the effectiveness and health of the workplace.

Healthy Workplace – Engaging employees in the planning process

With the national economy in continual flux, aging demographics and global competition for labour, organizations are placing more emphasis on strategic planning to manage their growth and change. Well-intended managers roll out strategic plans only to be disappointed that employees don't seem to "buy-in" to their ideas. This disconnect between management and front-line staff leads to less engaged employees, lower levels of productivity and higher turnover.

The following suggestions can help management build healthy workplaces by collaborating with employees in the planning process:

- Understand what motivates your employees and why they enjoy working for you.
- Have the courage to ask your employees what is not working to identify areas that need improvement.
- Go one step further and ask what you, as their supervisor, can do to improve their work environment.
- Take stock of your employee assets. What skills do they have that are not used in their current position? What is their passion? Where can they apply this passion at work?
- Identify individual employees who want to be part of the planning process, but have a clearly defined communication strategy that provides opportunity for input from all employees throughout the process.

With this information, your management team can begin the planning process with a better understanding of how your current employees will fit into the future of the organization. A clear and well-communicated strategic plan enables employers to more accurately recruit and retain employees that are the right fit for the organization.

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Supporting a Culturally Diverse Workplace

The face of the Canadian workplace is rapidly changing with more internationally educated professionals fuelling the growth in Canada. Diversity in the workplaces brings different perspectives resulting in innovation solutions, a wealth of diverse knowledge and skills, and greater understanding of clients to compete on the global marketplace. For organizations to maximize the benefits of a culturally diverse workplace, an effective support system is a wise investment.

The following suggestions can support a culturally diverse workplace:

- Provide an extensive orientation process that is more than one day that goes beyond providing an employee handbook.
- Set up a support system to help new employees. A mentorship program can ease the transition to working in a new country. It can be a rewarding experience for mentors and often appreciated by mentees.
- Provide cultural training to your managers and employees. Training will assist managers to understand cultural differences and help employees to successfully integrate into the Canadian workplace.
- Communicate clearly the expectations to new employees. Explain what is acceptable in your workplace.
- Organize activities for new employees and their families to get to know other employees and community. This often leads to building trust between your employees and within the organization.

Key elements when working in a healthy diverse workplace are to be open minded and not make assumptions, appreciate the uniqueness that every employee brings to your organization, and create opportunities to learn from each other.

Violet Poon is an intercultural consultant and facilitator working with managers and employees of culturally diverse organizations to help them understand cultural differences. She has worked with internationally educated professionals from over 30 countries to help them successfully integrate into the Canadian workplace.

Finding Opportunity in Conflict

Well managed conflict contributes to a healthy workplace in many ways. When conflict is well managed and it can aid in the transformation of teams, affect positive change, strengthen relationships, build accountability and contribute to productivity and attainment of results. All teams require ongoing work to remain strong, healthy and resilient. Similarly all teams will experience periods of change, struggle and challenge. The key is how these situations are responded to that can make the difference.

The following suggestions can support teams in creating healthy workplaces through effectively managing conflict and difficult conversations:

- Help team members feel connected, and in communication with one another
- Address issues, difficulties, disagreements and conflicts at the earliest point in time
- Collaborate to create mutually satisfactory solutions
- Communicate effectively, clearly and respectfully
- View disagreement and conflict as an opportunity (not a crisis). As R. Bach states “every problem has for you a gift in its hands”. Viewing conflict as opportunity encourages growth, change and cooperative solutions.
- Provide training to equip employees with the necessary skills, attitudes and steps to effectively respond to and resolve conflict

- Ensure that there is follow up to support individuals in implementing their agreements and commitments

When addressing conflict it is essential that the individuals prepare for the discussion, the nature of the disagreement (issue) is clarified, which then sets the stage for a respectful dialogue. Remaining open minded, interested in the other person's perspectives and identifying underlying interests will help identify common ground and opportunities for solutions.

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Rediscovering play at work

In today's world of work, there are two types of key decision makers we see everyday: those key decision makers ready to make it happen and those who watch things happen. Rediscovering the joy of play at work is for those key decision makers who are ready to make it happen. Now's the right time. Through the sheer magic of playing together, create a feeling of community in which co-workers are truly connected, operating more effectively with each other and celebrating their achievements.

When planning for the upcoming year the first step to best address incorporating play at work is to organize a set of standards in your best practices model around the driving belief that we need to have more fun. Your ability to focus on enhancing the value of your department's services by totally integrating this attitude into your best practices model results in organizational learning opportunities, AGMs, meetings, staff appreciation events, etc., that are more appealing, invigorating and leading edge for staff and management.

While there may be different reasons or objectives as to why they want to harness the power of play at work, there are common threads. We can streamline these common threads to nicely fit into one or more of the following intentions. In your planning meetings capture the true intent, gain clarity and then clearly communicate one or more of the following intentions across your organization.

- Create a Healthy Workplace Environment
- Keep Valued Employees
- Opportunities for Staff Training & Development
- Employee Communication & Participation
- Meaningful Staff Recognition & Rewards

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Building and sustaining healthy and resilient teams and organizations is an ongoing process, not a destination. Investing in people, relationships and the organizational culture goes a long way to supporting a successful business that reaches both its results and its potential.