

Healthy Workplace: Successful Workplace

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Yeah, Obama! I just had to say it – I am feeling so joyful and optimistic these days. The recent US election is proof positive that change is possible. Next up – law firms. Can we lawyers seek ways to improve communication, address chronic stress and improve what some experience as dysfunction in our work environments? You betcha!

I recently attended a conference entitled “Navigating the Landscape for Employee Health” hosted by the Ontario Health Association in conjunction with the Nova Scotia Association of Health Organizations, and others. Although the day seemed a bit dominated by the participation of health sector professions, there was a sufficient mix of government agencies and private sector employers to give a sense that we lawyers are not alone. Many types of employers are challenged by how to create and maintain a healthy workplace.

While I took some warped pleasure in hearing physicians and other health care workers describe hospitals as the worst work environments (it's always nice to hear about someone worse off), I was mostly struck by the similarities we all share.

Here are some of the emerging themes from the conference – consider them tips on how to take responsibility and make your workplace healthy for yourself and your co-workers. (This is the Obama buy in – we all have to be active participants in finding solutions, especially if we want to retain the good people who work with us each day.)

Are your people number one, really? How many times do you say you just couldn't do it without the support of your secretary, junior lawyer, office manager, _____ (insert numerous other people here)? So how do you treat your near and dear? This is the number one place to start walking your talk. Find out what inspires your people, and help bring that to their workplace. Is it about flex hours? Do they need to hear meaningful feedback that acknowledges their work? What else?

Get personal. Know your people. Find out what makes them tick, what they care about, what's important to them outside of their work lives. Helping them feel known and valued for who they are is another way to create a healthy work environment.

Physical environment matters. Whether it's natural light, an ergonomically correct work station or a scent free environment, the physical space you provide for your staff makes a huge difference in their personal well-being, and the resulting ability to do good work. Bring on the feng shui consultants, it's time to rearrange the furniture. How can you improve the physical environment you offer your employees to best meet their needs?

People want to make a contribution. At work. In their communities. People want to make a difference. How do you support this objective? When people feel like they are making a difference it increases their level on engagement and results in better work product. Maybe you need to give your office manager a chance to attend day-time meetings for her favourite charity board. As long as her work is getting done, she'll be a happier camper and you'll reap the rewards in increased work productivity.

Firm values = personal wellness = firm values. It's circular. How do your firm values incorporate a commitment to the personal wellness of your staff? How do your healthy workplace initiatives support your firm values? If your firm is all about offering excellent services, what helps your people be at their best to meet this goal?

Creating a cultural shift. People lined up to vote for an African American president in the United States. Cultures can change. What is your current firm culture? How does it offer support to or detract from a healthy workplace? What changes need to be made in areas such as communication, trust, social environment, teamwork and leadership?

Nurturing a community. Many of us have connections to various communities such as family, neighbours, racial or ethnic groups, religious groups, athletics, children's school, and our work. These are all communities with which we can have very meaningful connections, a sense of responsibility and mutual caring. How do you foster a sense of community in your workplace? What recognition is given for people taking the time to really care about each other?

Pay attention to physical health. OK, if you're a senior partner and you're still smoking – time to kick the habit. Lead by example. Offer support for employees looking after their physical well-being by giving them some cash for a gym membership or bringing a yoga teacher in for a lunch hour class. Offer healthy food and drink alternatives at firm socials, or go one step further and offer ONLY healthy alternatives. You really can make a vegan cocoa carob cake with coffee date icing taste fabulous – I tried and it worked!

Ask. Doesn't matter if you're adding wellness questions to employee surveys or just chatting around the water cooler, find out what your staff thinks would make for a healthier workplace. See what they're interested in and how they could be engaged in healthy workplace initiatives.

Be a champion and find other champions. In addition to leading initiatives for change, gather support from others. Who are the opinion leaders in your firm? Get them on board to help implement healthy workplace initiatives.

Feed your bottom line. Maybe you just want to do the right thing, but it helps to know that a healthier workplace leads to higher productivity and better retention of employees.

Have a plan. It can take a while to make the changes necessary to create healthy workplaces. Don't put band aids on what could be deep wounds. Investigate the problems, identify solutions, and implement changes in a consistent way over time.

The health professionals at the conference seemed to have this crazy idea that if hospitals were healthier places in which to work there may be this spin-off effect where patients get better faster too. Imagine what's possible from a healthier law firm – quicker resolution of disputes, higher level of client satisfaction, proactive legal solutions. We could call it the Obama effect.