

White Paper

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Focus On Health, Not Problems: Building A Healthy Organizational Lifestyle

“Focus on Health...”

Employee turnover, we all know what it means, but what does it imply? Many organization development and human resources experts have written about the negative effects of employee turnover, including the impact on a company’s profitability, productivity, and morale. Unfortunately, company leaders are rarely energized or motivated to do anything about the employee turnover in their organization. Why would they be? It is difficult to be positive when facing the high cost of replacing employees, reduced output due to a reduction in knowledgeable and trained employees, and remaining employees feeling discouraged due to increased work load and/or seeing their friends leaving the company.

What leaders usually do is to ask “How do we stop employee turnover?” While this is a reasonable question, we are often fooled by the illusion that turnover is the problem. In comparing this situation to the human body, we could similarly ask “How do we get rid of this cough?” However, is the cough the problem? No...the cough is the symptom of some deeper illness. Treating only the cough by taking syrup or sucking on cough drops will not address the illness. A stronger treatment is needed, such as antibiotics. Likewise, in an organization, turnover is a symptom of a deeper problem in the system that must be addressed.

Some organizations conduct exit interviews to determine **why** individuals are leaving the company. Some of these organizations may collect the data and review it. A few might even make that effort to try to fix the issues. This is just a start at determining the cause of the turnover and at addressing it.

Let’s take the human body analogy again and take it one step further. We have the symptoms of bronchitis and recognize the illness because of the collection of symptoms we experience (sore throat, coughing, stuffy nose, etc.). We go to the doctor and get antibiotics, and the illness is gone within 4 or 5 days. But what if we don’t eat right, get enough sleep, exercise or wash our hands regularly? Aren’t we possibly setting ourselves up to get sick all over again? What we need to do is prevent illnesses from settling into our system in the first place by building up our overall health and well being. Organizational systems function in much the same way. Leaders in organizations need to focus on building up their overall organizational health and well being in order to prevent system “illnesses” and the symptoms that they produce.

So how do leaders go about building up the underlying health of the organization, thereby eliminating turnover as an issue and – more importantly – engaging their employees?

What follows are five steps in a process that will help leaders build organizational health:

1. Commit to integrity as a core principle

Before any actions are taken, the leadership of an organization **must** commit to the process of building organizational health. The leaders must believe in the importance of this process and agree to follow through with it and support the process both verbally and behaviorally. This will require intense discussion among the leadership about integrity within the organization. The leaders will need to come to a unanimous decision that their core principle (and that of the organization as a whole) will need to be integrity. They will all need to make a sincere promise to each other **and** the employees that they are committed to organizational health. If even one leader breaks this promise of improvement by complaining to other employees about the improvement effort, or not holding themselves or others accountable for expectations that are established, it will compromise the success of the efforts.

Once the leadership is committed to integrity as a core principle, the employees will need to be brought into the discussion. The best way to ensure buy-in is to get them involved up front. Being honest is part of demonstrating integrity, so the leadership should acknowledge the problems that the organization is facing and take responsibility for those problems. The case for the necessity to build organizational health must also be made, so why not use the health of the human body as part of the conversation? Finally, it will be important to get as many employees as possible to commit to the improvement process. Talk about integrity and how the leadership has committed to the promise. Of course, there will be skeptics, but if at least 20% get on board and if 10% are willing to be advocates, there is a very good chance at success. Many of those who are initially cynical about the process will become supporters once they see that the leadership is true to their word over time.

2. Envision your organization as a truly healthy system

The next step will be to lead the employees in an activity of envisioning what a truly healthy organization looks like – specifically theirs. All goals need to be clarified before any strategies can be developed. Successful body builders know and write down what results they are working toward: the measurements of their muscles, body fat percentage, and body mass index. They also compare their goals with those who have already succeeded. It is no different with this process. Have descriptions of organizations that are healthy (ideally in the same industry) available to help get the ideas flowing. Have everyone focus on the large scale concepts such as culture (how people treat each other), human development (knowledge and skill level of employees), leadership (leadership style and structure), and employee contribution (employee autonomy and involvement level in decision making). Stay away from getting into detailed procedures or strategies as those will be developed in a later step in this process.

It is extremely important to involve the employees in this process so that they can also develop that picture of what they are working toward in their minds. Knowing that they participated in the painting of that picture will further increase support of the efforts to build organizational health. If the company is small, having a full group brainstorming and consensus session may be a good method of achieving this step. If it is a large organization, involve employees by leading smaller group sessions (by departments, for example). It is important to have employees involved in person versus using e-mail or mail-in ideas in order to prevent those skeptical employees from completely avoiding participation. (It is tough to be involved in this type of discussion and disagree with - in front of colleagues - a goal of organizational health. That would be paramount to announcing to everyone that you want to continue working in a sick organization.)

3. Conducting an organizational ‘check-up’

Once a picture of health is envisioned and everyone agrees with that goal, the next step is to determine the current level of organizational health. Like pulling up a map on the Internet, we need to know our current location before we can bring up the directions to our destination. Thinking of the human body analogy, we generally aren’t in a place to start a workout and diet regimen when we aren’t feeling well. We need to go to the doctor and get a checkup before any program or treatment is prescribed. It is no different in an organization.

One of the easiest ways to determine the current status of organizational health is to survey the employees. Using a commercial survey is one option, as is developing an individualized survey. If developing an individualized survey, consider asking questions about those same concept areas that were discussed in the visioning activity. A survey could also be as simple as asking “What do you believe is currently healthy in this organization?” and “What do you believe is unhealthy in this organization?” Then, the responses can be synthesized and categorized by the concept areas of the visioning activity.

If the first two steps were done well and the employees truly believe that the leadership is committed to the positive changes that have been proposed, and they themselves are committed, then the rate of response should be quite high. It is important to keep the employees updated when the results are compiled. Let them know what the problems are, but also let them know what is going well in the organization. This will help keep them feel “in the loop,” and will continue to affirm that the leadership is taking responsibility for the problems as well as for fixing them.

4. Develop and implement strategies to treat your organizational ‘illnesses’

Once the problems or ‘illnesses’ of the organization are identified, thought needs to be put into which strategies will best resolve the problems and continue moving the organization toward that picture of health. If one of the problems is lack of communication, then improved communication systems may need to be developed and implemented. If another is substandard supervisory and management skills, then think seriously about creating a system of assessing manager and supervisor knowledge and skills and then developing appropriate training, coaching and succession programs for the people in those roles. These are just two examples of what could be quite a large list of problems, so the leadership and the employees need to understand that this step will take time and will require patience and persistence. Reminders about integrity and remaining committed to the promise of organizational health would be prudent throughout this step.

As with all the other steps, employees must remain actively involved. Getting employees involved in the development of these strategies through gathering feedback and/or having them as members of committees charged with creating certain strategies will continue to strengthen the employees’ buy-in to this process. What’s important is that you keep all employees up-to-date on the progress of these strategies, as well as the impact after they are implemented.

5. Develop a fitness maintenance program for the organization

While working hard to eliminate the “illnesses” of the company, it is also essential to develop a fitness maintenance program to ensure that the organizational health is kept as a priority over the long haul. What does the leadership need to do on a daily, weekly, monthly and yearly basis to maintain health?

Yearly: Every year, we go to the doctor for a check-up to ensure new problems haven’t arisen. In an organization, would it not be a good idea to take the pulse of the organization every year, as well? Find out what employees are thinking regarding what is going well and what is not going well and continue with Steps #3 and #4 on an ongoing basis.

Monthly: Wise athletes change their workout routines every four weeks or so to keep the muscles challenged and working hard. In an organization, a similar strategy can be adopted on a monthly basis by determining progress toward the organizational, departmental and individual goals, celebrating successes, learning from failures and establishing new goals or revising existing goals, if needed.

Weekly: Most workout routines are developed based on a weekly schedule. One such workout schedule could include aerobics five times a week, abdominals five times a week, weights three times a week, and yoga twice a week. In an organization, setting short-term goals for the week and reviewing them at the end of each week will help individuals continue to move toward achieving the overall organizational goals. People also benefit from a coach or mentor who can review the achievements of the week with the employee and affirm successes and give advice and tips for the next week. This coach or mentor should, ideally, be the supervisor, although a colleague may also serve that role.

Daily: Ultimately, to maintain health, we must get sufficient sleep every night and keep to a certain, healthful diet that either limits us to a certain number of calories a day, or possibly focuses on the number of vegetables, fruits, protein, etc. we consume each day. In an organization, this daily routine is very individual. People need to live the principles and values of the organization in every interaction with co-workers, supervisors, direct reports, clients, vendors, and any other stakeholder that employees come in contact with each day. This will help each person build the positive relationships that are essential for employee success, as well as overall organizational success. If the organization has not determined a set of values or principles, doing so is strongly advised.

Is building organizational health easy? No. Is there a quick fix? No. This is a long-term, complex and challenging process that requires the commitment of everyone in the organization. Will there be setbacks? Absolutely. When we are living a healthy lifestyle, does that mean that we cannot ever catch a cold, or find ourselves in an automobile accident? Sometimes new problems crop up, or external forces require us to live with limited abilities, at least for a while. This is another reason that the integrity of the leadership and the commitment of everyone involved are so essential. Should such challenges arise, the entire organization will need to pull together to deal with them. The key to success is staying focused on the overall, long-term health of the organization.