



Healthy Organizations Inspire Learning and Collaboration

By Graham Lowe

When was the last time you did a health “check-up” of your organization? Just as you monitor your personal health, you need to do the same with your work organization if you want it to be thriving and resilient. Viewing organizations through a “health” lens provides a holistic and integrated view of what’s needed to sustain long-term success.

A healthy organization forges an enduring link between employee well-being and performance. This link must become central to the business’s philosophy, long-term strategy, and day-to-day operations. The best way to strengthen this link is to focus on healthy organization building blocks – a vibrant workplace that inspires employees, a positive culture with strong people values, and inclusive leadership that rallies everyone around a compelling workplace vision.

Training and development professionals can tune up the health of their organization by leveraging the connection between a vibrant workplace and the performance-enhancing goals of learning and collaboration.

Vibrant workplaces

Most successful organizations today have policies and programs in place designed to keep their employees safe and healthy. Even during the great recession, employee wellness programs continued to be a corporate priority. But positioning for the recovery and beyond requires more than wellness. The concept of a vibrant workplace helps us to do this by getting at the underlying drivers of positive employee experiences and performance capabilities.

Let’s look more closely at the specific features of relationships, jobs, work environments, and organizational supports that constitute a vibrant workplace:

- *Jobs*: Employees have the autonomy to direct their own work, which they find both challenging and meaningful. Employees have ample opportunity to learn and to develop and apply their skills and abilities on the job. People know how their role fits in and makes a difference. Compensation and other rewards are fair and at a decent level.
- *Relationships*: Mutual respect characterizes working relationships among coworkers and between employees and managers. People trust each other and are committed to a shared vision and mission. Employees experience a sense of belonging because the workplace is a true community.
- *Environments*: The work environment is open, collaborative and participatory. There is a premium on two-way communication throughout the organization. Employees have meaningful input into decisions affecting them. All employees’ contributions are valued and recognized. Work is team-based and cooperative.
- *Supports*: Supervisors support employees to succeed in their jobs, develop their talents and have a balanced life. Employees have adequate facilities, equipment, tools and other resources needed to do their job well. There are appropriate policies and programs in place to promote health, safety and effective human resource management practices.

Note that few of these ingredients specifically refer to health. That’s because a vibrant workplace focuses on the context in which people thrive at work – not individual health outcomes. A vibrant workplace inspires employees to continuously develop and apply their capabilities to deliver



excellent results. Above all, employees learn and collaborate, two activities critical for an organization to fully tap its human capabilities.

Inspired employees

Workers who feel inspired actively learn, share their knowledge and apply their skills. And they are able to adapt to changes in the business environment, customers' needs and preferences, and within the organization. They look forward to coming to work each day because they know they can make a difference, grow personally, and feel the pride of meaningful accomplishments – all important for personal wellbeing. And they do this within a web of supportive relationships with coworkers, their supervisors, and their clients or customers.

Vibrant workplaces also encourage individual and group learning. Active learning behaviour comes naturally to inspired employee. Learning helps workers to avoid repeating mistakes, to reproduce successes and to discover new work methods, services or products. Harvard University's David Garvin describes "learning facilitators" as those features of an organization and its people that support continuous, wide-spread learning. In a vibrant workplace, all employees are able to actively acquire, interpret and apply new knowledge or ideas. Learning facilitators include attributes of vibrant workplaces: openly sharing and debating different perspectives, timely and accurate feedback, time and space for learning, and a "sense of psychological safety."

Experiencing work in this way, an employee moves beyond just being engaged in her or his job to feeling truly inspired.

Beyond the learning organization

While there are parallels here with a learning organization, learning is only one feature of a healthy organization. Rather than treating learning as a defining characteristic of an organization, from a healthy organization perspective learning is part of the internal dynamics that contribute to employees' well-being and job satisfaction, as well as their capacity to perform better.

Work becomes more collaborative. By collaborating, individual employees and teams collectively generate and apply new knowledge and skills – leading to innovation. Management guru Peter Drucker observed that knowledge workers teach each other and learn together. Innovation flows from collective teaching and learning, keeping ahead of the competition or providing even higher levels of public service at lower costs.

Learning and collaboration go hand in hand. The 21st century version of the learning organization can be called the collaborative organization. The twining of learning and collaboration better reflects the realities of an emerging global economy which places a premium on creatively applying knowledge.

The project teams, business networks and global supply chains of today's successful corporations require new ways for workers to create solutions. The emerging 21st-century form of work organization is post-bureaucratic, fluidly recombining knowledge into business solutions. Some experts refer to the knowledge-based, flexible organization as a collaborative community, grounded on a shared ethic of interdependent contributions. More simply, it can be called "healthy".

Taking action



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Learning and development professionals can do three things to promote and sustain healthy outcomes for employees, customers, and shareholders (or citizens, in the public sector). First, develop and share a vision of what your workplace has the potential to be in 2020. Whether you call this a “healthy organization vision” or use language more suited to your business, the vision must describe the workplace, culture and leadership attributes of a thriving organization. Second, clearly and regularly communicate to senior management how learning and collaboration is critical for tomorrow’s success and therefore requires improvements in today’s work environment. And third, join with your colleagues in HR, health and wellness, and organization development to find more efficient and effective ways to coordinate all people initiatives in support of sustainable success.

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