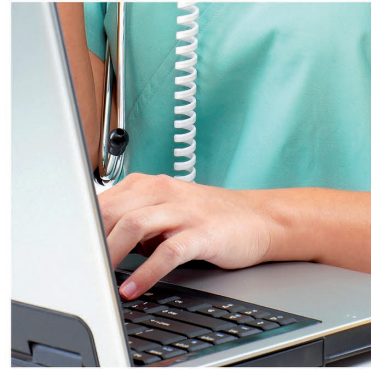




GRAHAM LOWE

Building Healthy and Sustainable Health Care Organizations



A subtle but profound shift is underway in workplaces. Human resource and workplace health experts are focusing on how employees' work experiences influence their health and job performance. Managers are searching for ways to fully engage their workforce, unleash hidden talents, and reduce employee costs. Boards and executives are taking more action on their community and environmental commitments in an era of rising public expectations for ethical practices.

These convergent trends, evident in all sectors of the economy, open up new opportunities to improve the quality of worklife, organizational performance, and communities—all at the same time. The emerging model of a 21st century organization is one that has healthy outcomes for all stakeholders. Health care is one of Canada's largest employers, accounting for 8.5% of the workforce (Statistics Canada, 2009), and has a unique role in population health and quality of life. As such, health care employers are well positioned to be leaders in building healthy, humanly sustainable organizations.

Viewing Organizations Through a Health Lens

We talk about healthy people as vigorous, flourishing, robust, thriving, resilient, and fit. The same words also describe healthy organizations. Healthy people experience physical and mental well-being because all physical, mental, and emotional systems are in sync. They effectively perform their roles as workers, citizens, partners, and parents while further developing their potential. And they have a positive relationship with the environment in which they live, drawing from it while contributing back. Similarly, in a healthy organization, all systems are well integrated: it operates successfully today, develops new capacity to thrive tomorrow, and has mutually beneficial relationships with clients and communities.

Above all, healthy organizations forge an enduring link between well-being and performance. This link must become central to the organization's philosophy, long-term strategy, and how it operates day-to-day. Progress can result when employees take initiative, alone or together, within their limited sphere of influence to create small but tangible improvements. It is at the level of micro-action that progress towards a healthy organization ideal can best be made.

Population health experts know that for people to thrive, they must live in environments that enable them to realize their human potential. This principle is familiar to health care

professionals, providing an advantage to the sector as an employer. The challenge now is to apply this thinking to employees and physicians in health care workplaces.

Healthy Organization Building Blocks

Having a clear understanding of the building blocks of a healthy organization is helpful (see Figure 1). A vibrant workplace is the centerpiece of a healthy and sustainable organization because this is the environment in which people work day in and day out.

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Vibrant workplaces do more than engage employees: they cultivate a sense of personal inspiration about one's work. An engaged employee is satisfied and loyal. Inspired employees are more than this, actively seeking out ways to develop and use their skills, knowledge, and abilities to further corporate goals. In order for employees to apply their capabilities, they need relationships, resources, and systems that enable them to collaborate. When workers collaborate, the sum

becomes greater than the parts: teams and the organization develop capabilities for performance, innovation, and creativity that far surpass what individual members bring to their jobs.

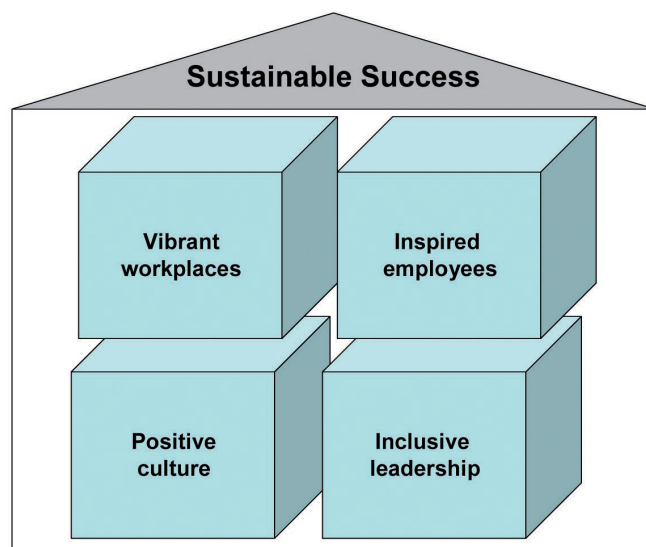


Figure 1. Building blocks of a healthy organization. From *Creating Healthy Organizations: How Vibrant Workplaces Inspire Employees to Achieve Sustainable Success* (p. 22), by G. Lowe, 2010, Toronto: Rotman/UTP Publishing. Copyright 2010 by Graham Lowe. Reprinted with permission.



Two key factors that enable a vibrant workplace are culture and leadership. A positive culture based on strong people-values will resonate with employees and managers, providing guidelines for healthy and productive work behaviours. While leadership from the top for a health organization’s vision and goals is important, this alone will not mobilize the workforce to move down the healthy organization path. What’s needed is an inclusive approach to leadership that empowers all members of an organization to take responsibility for healthy changes.

Having employees at all levels co-create healthy and productive work environments builds on the World Health Organization’s definition of health promotion as “the process of enabling individuals and communities to increase control over the determinants of health and thereby improve their health” (Malzon & Lindsay, 1992). Translated into workplaces, employees must have ongoing opportunities to improve the environment in which they work.

For example, England’s National Health System (NHS) looked at its performance through the eyes of employees in

a research project called *What Matters to Staff in the NHS* (Ipsos MORI, 2008). Staff interviews and focus groups identified what makes NHS staff members feel motivated and fulfilled at work. Ten factors that matter to staff were identified and grouped into four themes: resources to deliver quality care for patients, support needed to do a good job, a worthwhile job with the chance to develop, and opportunities to improve how work gets done. Positive staff experiences contributed to four strategic outcomes: staff motivation to provide high quality patient care; staff advocacy of the NHS; patient satisfaction; and public satisfaction. The annual NHS Staff Survey now measures the factors identified in the *What Matters to Staff* research, with survey results included in annual performance reporting and management accountability for improvements. It is fair to say that in the highest performing NHS organizations, staff are more than motivated and satisfied—they are inspired.

Healthy organization building blocks have the potential to raise the bar for quality outcomes by contributing to a more humanly sustainable type of health care organization. That’s

because healthy organization building blocks are mutually reinforcing, with success producing an upward trajectory that further strengthens the culture, validates the importance of shared leadership, maintains vibrant workplace conditions, and continues to inspire employees. The more employees feel they are able to contribute to the organization's success, the more they feel empowered to further expand their capabilities in innovative ways.

Making Organizations Humanly Sustainable

I use the term “sustainable success” to link operational, people, and ethical goals. This revises the “triple bottom line” view of “people, planet, profit” by highlighting how organizations can renew themselves. In this regard, organizations need to renew the capabilities of their workforce and they need to renew their relationships with clients and communities.

An organization's future will be bleak indeed if it burns out employees, runs deficits, alienates clients, acts unethically, and is irresponsible towards the environment. By contrast, organizations that thrive are constantly regenerating their resources. Leaders in such organizations think long-term and holistically. Organizations are like fragile ecosystems. Continued success depends on renewing the fine balance needed between culture, people practices, systems, and structures.

Healthy organizations generate benefits for the communities in which they operate. For example, healthier employees are less likely to use health care services. This has important implications for the public health system and employer-provided health benefit costs. Health care employers need to look in the mirror and ask, “How do our people practices affect the very system of which we are a vital part?” The supportive environment of a healthy organization helps employees enjoy a fulfilling personal and family life. Employees have more time and energy to raise their children, assist their aging parents, and volunteer in community activities that matter to them. The latter surely is relevant to health care organizations given their increasing reliance on community fundraising and volunteers.

Employees now hold employers to higher ethical standards. While corporate social responsibility comes in many forms, what's needed for “walking the talk” is having a strong connection with human resource goals and practices. Branding an organization as community-minded—essential in health care—signals to prospective employees that it is an employer that cares, treats others well, and reflects their personal values. Yet in health care organizations, there often is a clear disconnect between the priority given to the health and safety of health care providers and the organization's mission to improve the well-being of patients and communities.

Sustainable success also requires employers to cultivate people's capabilities for the future. Capability is a person's actual and potential ability to do something and, at an organizational level, collective capabilities are greater than the sum of individual capabilities. Human resource experts Dave Ulrich and Norm Smallwood call these “intangible assets”: “You can't see or touch them, yet they can make all the difference in the world...” (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2004). In today's uncertain economic environment, any organization's future depends more than ever on its capabilities to adapt, learn, lead, innovate, and be resilient.

Whatever actions you decide will move your organization down a healthy trajectory, implementation requires a values-based philosophy that is applied rigorously in all relationships, both inside and outside the organization. At the heart of sustainable success is the integrity with which board members, managers, and employees apply the organization's core values in all decisions and actions. Consistency in this regard expands the possibilities for positively shaping the future of your organization—and society. Q

*This article is adapted from Graham Lowe's book *Creating Healthy Organizations: How Vibrant Workplaces Inspire Employees to Achieve Sustainable Success*, published in May 2010 by Rotman/UTP Publishing. For more information, visit www.creatinghealthyorganizations.ca.*

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