
Healthy Workplace Strategies: Creating Change and Achieving Results

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Prepared for the Workplace Health Strategies Bureau,
Health Canada**

by

**Graham S. Lowe, Ph.D.
The Graham Lowe Group Inc.
www.grahamlowe.ca**

January 2004

© The Graham Lowe Group Inc., 2004.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of Health Canada.

Acknowledgements: The author would like to thank Naomi Castle and Tyler Wry for research assistance, and Kathy van Denderen for copyediting.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Healthy jobs and workplaces benefit workers and employers, customers and shareholders, citizens and society. This report focuses on the *organizational* change processes, strategies and tactics that can bring about healthier and more productive working conditions.

Successful interventions must target underlying workplace and organizational factors. Most promising in this regard is the link between healthy work environments and improved health outcomes for individual employees *and* improved business results. This widens the agenda to the entire organization: its values, people practices, work systems and performance.

Workplace Health as Organizational Change

Organizational change research distinguishes *transformational* change from *superficial* change. Creating a healthy organization exemplifies transformational change. Introducing a fitness program or a policy on flexible work schedules are examples of superficial change, if they are not part of a larger strategy. The shift to a new culture and work systems takes time – easily 3 to 5 years. Often, it results from a sequence of small steps that are guided by a compelling vision.

However, most transformational change initiatives fail. Estimates suggest success rates between 25-33% for reaching the intended goals of change. This makes it imperative that champions of workplace health learn from a wide range of organizational change experiences.

Viewed as organizational change, healthy workplace strategies must follow strong *guiding principles*, which this report enunciates, based on a synthesis of current research and practice.

An Action Model

While a fitness or smoking cessation program easily can be run by health promotion staff, a different approach is required to transform the values, management practices and work systems of an organization.

Health promotion and human resource professionals must team up, and there must be support from managers and supervisors at all levels, employees, and unions. Stakeholders must engage in discussions about the role of the entire organization in “creating health.”

This report, therefore, offers an *action model* as a tool for achieving healthy organizations. The model highlights the importance of establishing enabling conditions in order to make the organization change-ready, then designing a process that engages all stakeholders in actively shaping a healthy workplace. The process is iterative, with lots of reflection and readjustment built in. There is no one best way to create a healthy organization and no neat list of best practices that define such an organizational state.

The Action Model can guide the implementation of healthy workplace changes, raising the following issues that will influence the choices made by change agents:

Recognize and remove major barriers to organizational change:

- Some of these barriers have been identified by workplace health experts, but need to be understood as common problems of organizational change.
- A lack of information is a source of organizational inertia. Overcoming inertia requires identifying change barriers and facilitators.
- Work intensification is a major barrier to organizational innovation and change. Specifically, high job stress impedes changes that can support good psychosocial health.
- Cooperation or resistance among front-line managers can be the 'Achilles heel' of organizational change.
- The best way to help supervisors and managers play a leadership role in change is to make improved workplace health their issue.
- Human resource and organizational health processes are good indicators of successful business strategy implementation.

Spread new organizational practices through learning and innovation:

- Effective bundles of healthy workplace practices are hard to imitate. There is no easy-to-follow checklist or template for such changes.
- Standardized programs do not work for primary workplace health interventions that address environmental determinants of health.
- A healthy workplace strategy must be designed to fit an organization's unique history, culture, market conditions and employee characteristics.
- Learning capacity is critical for a healthy organization, and this is developed over time and through collaboration.
- A healthy workplace is a prerequisite for business innovation in products and services.

Take an integrated top-down and bottom-up approach:

- Examples of successful change reveal that what's needed is not change management but change leadership.
- Successful change requires a thawing of the status quo to make the organization change-ready. A compelling vision is required and it must be homegrown and effectively communicated.
- The major weakness of traditional approaches to change management is a reliance on a top-down, leadership-driven process.

- Overcoming these pitfalls requires balancing leadership and employee empowerment, or in other words, combining top-down and bottom-up approaches.

Engage all employee groups in the change process:

- The change process itself must contribute to healthy workplace goals.
- A success factor is strong commitment from top management, reinforced by their behaviour. Also essential is the meaningful involvement of all employee groups.
- Worker involvement in the *process* of creating and maintaining healthier working conditions is a prerequisite of a healthy workplace.

Reduce the stress of change so it is not an impediment:

- Workplace change can be stressful, so a healthy change process must be designed to reduce workplace stressors.
- The 'demand-control' model of job stress shows how healthy workplace changes can improve the psychosocial work environment.
- 'High performance workplaces' must be model healthy enterprises with healthy workers, otherwise this new approach could compromise health goals.

Measure progress:

- Monitoring and evaluation are often weak links in the chain that connects organizational change interventions to desired outcomes.
- Good measures can help decision-makers to view workplace health initiatives as investments in people that contribute to performance over the long-term.
- Change can provide learning opportunities about how to do things better, but only if evaluation data inform decisions and actions.
- Healthy workplace advocates also need to document the cost of *inaction*, building this into their business case.
- Useful measures and evaluation procedures must examine outcomes and processes, track progress over time, and combine individual and organizational outcomes into a single framework.

Close knowledge gaps:

Answers to the following questions can help advance a healthy workplace agenda:

- What cluster of work environment factors contribute most to positive employee and organizational health outcomes?

- How can we develop an inclusive approach to a healthy workplace, which includes all workers, work settings and businesses?
- What motivates executives and other senior managers to become healthy workplace champions and to follow through with needed actions?
- How can healthy workplace goals be incorporated into corporate social responsibility frameworks?

The trap, of course, is getting stuck just thinking and talking about a vision of a future healthy workplace. Almost every organization has strengths to build on and opportunities to launch change. Building incrementally on these strengths and seizing present opportunities, however small to begin, can start making the vision a reality.