

From *The Chronicle Herald* – Apr. 5/07

Managing the workforce's emotional ergonomics

By BILL HOWATT

A CORE ELEMENT for most managers is the facilitation and implementation of a defined set of business objectives within a predetermined set of guidelines, such as budget, time and resources. No matter where these objectives originate, the manager is accountable for meeting them.

One critical key for a manager's success is the ability to secure a team's commitment and co-operation for working collectively to achieve these business objectives. Sounds simple, but many managers are not effective at getting this commitment.

And the cost of this ineffective behaviour often is not fully understood. One of the top reasons people leave their role is directly related to conflict and concerns with their direct manager.

As a business coach, I often get called by senior management to work with mid-level managers who are having a difficult time achieving their objectives. It is common to also learn the manager is having morale issues (or as I call it, workplace dissatisfaction). The cost of workplace dissatisfaction can be hard to grasp in real dollars. Dissatisfied employees often appear to be productive and meet at least minimal performance standards, but at what cost?

One of the fastest-growing causes of short-term disabilities is psychological distress. We know from research guru Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence* and *Social Intelligence*, that a person's capacity to manage their environment has a direct correlation to overall mental and physical wellness.

Based on Goleman's research, the dissatisfied worker could be at risk for stress-related illness, psychological distress and, from my personal research, perhaps even an addictive disorder.

I teach my coaching clients a concept I call emotional ergonomics. This relates to how the workplace impacts a person's emotions, similar to the way a machine, workstation or activity can affect a body physically.

I often wonder how long it will be before organizations such as Workers' Compensation use the same premium formula for workplaces that breed toxic environments that lead to workplace dissatisfaction as they do for a workplace where occupational health and safety is not a major focus and employees get hurt on the job.

I believe a toxic workplace increases workplace dissatisfaction that results in more potential psychological distress. It seems to make sense that a manager can be a conduit to help a workplace to have a positive atmosphere and assist in developing workplace satisfaction.

The new-millennium manager needs to not only manage production but also the emotional ergonomics of the workforce. If not, they risk an increase in wellness issues, presentism (being at work in body but not in mind), absenteeism, turnover, short-term disabilities due to psychological distress and perhaps even addictions.

All of these may not be directly correlated to performance but over time they can negatively impact productivity. This theme is a universal one I often address in coaching. The first and most important goal is to assist the manager to become aware of his or her role and influence.

The actions needed by a manager are often fundamental, though they still require a set of influencing and interpersonal skills competencies so they can demonstrate empathy, open communication and interest in their people.

One critical element for workplace satisfaction is often a healthy relationship with a manager. From my point of view, the manager's role is to serve the team to help it get the resources and pathways to be successful. For a manager to achieve goals over the long term, I suggest paying heed to workplace dissatisfaction and taking proactive steps to influencing people to perform.

As an old business professor told me, "We manage things and lead people."

