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## **Effective Workplace Practices – Get Your Employees Involved**

Creating a psychologically healthy workplace is becoming increasingly important for organizations. Whether the goal is to improve the quality of job candidates, retain highly qualified workers, reduce costs, or strengthen the organization's competitive advantage, innovative workplace practices allow organizations to meet their overall performance goals while simultaneously improving their employees' health and well-being. Employee involvement, a critical component of a healthy workplace, is a topic regularly discussed by management, but not one that is routinely integrated into efforts to address workplace health.

### **Why Employee Involvement?**

The hallmark of a healthy organization is one in which employees are active, engaged, creative participants, not merely passive recipients of company benefits. Employee involvement can be a stand-alone practice that improves employee well-being by giving them more autonomy and control over their work (Bond & Bunce, 2001; Bond & Bunce, 2003). Employee involvement can also be a tactic for leveraging the human capital of an organization (Fitz-Enz, 2000). Effective employee involvement strategies allow management and employees to partner in a way that meets the organization's needs, while also optimizing employee health and well-being.

By involving employees in designing, implementing, evaluating, and refining workplace programs, the organization can usually expect to see greater performance and more positive employee behaviors. In terms of creating workplace programs that promote employee health and well-being, such as through wellness, training, stress management, and safety programs, ample research (see Grawitch, Gottschalk, & Munz, 2006, and Lawler & Worley, 2006 for more detailed information) suggests that employee involvement can help to ensure that:

1. New programs are tailored appropriately for that organization's employees and unique context (e.g., structure, strategy, culture, constraints);
2. Employees actively participate in the program;
3. The program will produce the desired outcomes; and
4. The program will continue to be improved and refined.

Involvement activities allow top management and human resource professionals to bridge the gap between the plan for a new program or practice and the implementation of that plan. What makes sense to upper management or human resources is not always feasible on the ground floor. Integrating employee involvement into program development can ensure that the specific program is tailored to meet the unique challenges faced throughout the organization.

## **What is Employee Involvement?**

Lawler (1986, 1994, 2006) has argued that a high employee involvement system includes four elements: involvement in decision making (e.g., through self-managed teams or participation teams); communication of information about the organization; building of technical, social, and business skills; and rewards for skill building and organizational success. All four aspects are crucial to the organizational impact of employee involvement. Without good information, employee involvement will be ill-considered; without skills, involvement will be ineffective; and without appropriate rewards, employees will not be motivated to make decisions that meet organizational needs.

Employees also vary in terms of their desired level of involvement. Some employees, such as those with an instrumental view of work, may want relatively little involvement. For example, CareerBuilder.com's 2007 Father's Day Survey found that 37% of working fathers said they would leave their jobs if their spouse or partner made enough money to support the family. Other employees, such as those that identify very closely with their jobs, may want an increased level of involvement. Though involvement tactics can range from a low level (such as open door policies, suggestion forums, and surveys) to a high level (such as high involvement systems, self-managed work teams, and employee ownership), it is important that any employee involvement strategy be appropriately tailored to that organization's culture and its employees' needs.

## **How Do You Get Employees Involved?**

Employees can get involved at all stages of program development and implementation. Employees can be involved during assessment by providing input into assessment tools, completing assessment tools (such as employee surveys), and participating in meetings where assessment results are communicated.

Employees can be involved in program development and implementation by helping to identify the scope of new initiatives; providing input into program logistics, incentives, and format; creating the terminology used to communicate the new program; and participating on committees responsible for actually developing and implementing the program.

Finally, employees can be involved in evaluation and refinement of the program by providing reaction and learning data, providing suggestions for improving the program, and participating in sessions designed to provide feedback on assessment and refinement results.

An organization faces many challenges if it possesses a culture or management style that views employee involvement negatively. Those organizations often fall into at least one of three possible traps:

1. Failing to communicate important information with employees regarding company performance and their role in that performance;
2. Failing to seek employee input regarding the challenges employees face;
3. Failing to communicate that action was taken based on employee input and feedback.

Regularly falling into any of these traps can help to create a culture in which employees feel as though their opinions do not matter and are not valued. If that happens, effective employee involvement ceases to exist.

### **Linking Employee Involvement to a Healthy Workplace**

A true healthy workplace emphasizes the need to optimize the interplay between organizational systems and employee health and well-being needs. Rather than emphasizing the need to focus solely on organizational effectiveness or showering employees with benefits, a truly healthy workplace perspective strategically selects its benefits to meet the needs of both employees and the organization. To do this, organizations should:

1. Provide opportunities for employees to become involved and engaged in creating a healthy workplace;
2. Tailor new programs and policies to meet the specific needs of the employees and the organization;
3. Be very clear about the purpose of new programs, policies, and benefits, so that organizational leaders and employees know what is expected of such a program (e.g., what are the goals of the program, or what issues is it designed to address?);
4. Ensure that any new program (or existing program) is in alignment with the organizational context (e.g., culture, structure, strategy); and
5. Collect cost-benefit data, as a way to tie benefits back to organizational effectiveness outcomes (this will increase the likelihood that the benefit survives over time).

### **Two Examples**

At El Nuevo Día, a for-profit news organization in Puerto Rico, the organization uses employee volunteer teams to address specific issues that surface in the employee opinion survey. In one case, the team created a program called PRENDA, designed to provide peer-to-peer recognition and to select the employee of the year. The program was designed with input from employees, and management provided the necessary resources and support for the program. The employee of the year receives such perks as VIP parking and a paid vacation for that employee's family. Another case involved the development of a program called ENDI-TV, which recognized communication challenges within the organization. As such, an employee team recommended the installation of television monitors throughout the facility to permit easier communication of organization-wide information. Again, management provided the necessary support and resources for the initiative to be implemented.

Healthwise, a much smaller, not-for-profit organization, emphasizes three pillars in their mission: respect, teamwork, and doing the right thing. Thus, employee involvement in this organization ties employment practices to the organization's mission. During orientation, new hires are socialized into a culture where each employee is responsible for helping to create and maintain a positive culture. Therefore, at the outset, new employees are informed that they are responsible for being involved in strengthening the culture within the organization. Practices, such as regular employee surveys, team meetings to discuss survey results and plan initiatives, and forums to explore ways to strengthen the organization's culture, follow directly from these new employee orientations. In this particular organization, expectations for involvement are provided at the outset and reinforced throughout an employee's tenure.

These two examples highlight specific ways that organizations have tailored employee involvement approaches to fit their organizational needs, setting cultural norms and employee expectations that fit with the organization's vision and mission, and benefiting from employee involvement in terms of both organizational functioning and employee health and well-being.

By paying attention to the specific needs of the organization and its employees, rather than implementing off-the-shelf programs, trying to copy the established practices of other organizations, or going with the latest management fad, organizations can tailor their own programs, policies, and practices to meet the unique challenges that they and their workforce face. True, organizations must stay abreast of trends, including current practices, research, and changing needs of younger workers, but to haphazardly implement programs and policies without considering fit with the organization and its culture, needs of its employees, and possible unintended consequences increases the likelihood that the organization will be investing significant amounts of capital for very little return.

*This article is excerpted and adapted from an article written by Matt Grawitch, Gerry Ledford, and David Ballard. The article is currently under review at Organizational Dynamics.*

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