



## Editor's Notes

### PSYCHOLOGICALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACES

The American Psychological Association (APA) recently invited the *American Journal of Health Promotion* to serve as a cooperating organization in its Psychologically Healthy Workplace Awards program. (For details, see: <http://www.phwa.org/>). We accepted this invitation because the idea of encouraging employers to develop psychologically healthy workplaces is intuitively appealing. This intuition has borne itself out because, when I examined this concept closer, I realized that it raises many important questions.

Why would an employer want to have a psychologically healthy workplace? The benefits to employees seem rather obvious, but how does this translate to employer benefits? What are the specific outcomes for employers and how do we measure them? Workplace health promotion professionals have spent decades articulating and measuring employer benefits of workplace programs, and they are quite clear: enhanced morale and retention, medical cost containment, and enhanced productivity. Hundreds of studies have been published on the health benefits of programs and dozens on the financial impact. The health content of most workplace programs grew out of efforts to reduce heart disease risk factors, namely improving nutrition, reducing stress, stimulating physical activity, weight control and smoking cessation, and moderating alcohol consumption. We now know that the same basic formula works to prevent many forms of cancer. Strategies to improve each of these risk factors are fairly straight forward, the behavioral and biometric health benefits are relatively easy to measure and the process to measure financial benefits is straightforward, if not easy. Does creating a psychologically healthy workplace add new benefits, or is it merely a health promotion program through the lens of a psychologist?

As I looked closer, I saw that the components of a psychologically healthy workplace do address new dimensions. The Psychologically Healthy Workplaces Award focuses on five areas: employee involvement; health and safety; employee growth and development; work-life balance; and employee recognition. Effective communication is a sixth area that is expected to be woven into each of the five

dimensions. I do not know the literature well enough to know if these six factors flow from research on work satisfaction, stress management, or productivity management, and I could not find any APA literature that articulates the conceptual framework from which these components emerged. Nevertheless, it is clear that the concept of psychologically healthy workplaces encompasses more than health promotion. For example, strategies to stimulate employee involvement include self-managed work teams, employee committees or task forces, continuous improvement teams, participative decision making, and employee suggestion forums. Strategies to support employee growth and development include continuing education courses, tuition reimbursement, career development, skills training, opportunities for promotion and internal career advancement, coaching, mentoring, and leadership development programs.

The next step for me is to think about how to translate these suggestions into actual workplace programs. For example, if I wanted to make self-managed work teams an integral part of an organization, who in the organization would have authority to authorize this? What short term outcomes would I expect to see among individuals involved in self managed work teams? Would they be more satisfied with their work? Would they have fewer symptoms of stress or depression? What are the benefits to the organization, and how do I measure them? For example, would medical costs decrease or productivity increase?

Thinking about this awards program has forced me to give some serious thought to work satisfaction and psychological health issues I sometimes ignore. If this program has the same impact on other health promotion professionals, that is certainly a positive outcome. However, the greatest possible benefit of this awards program would be to provide employers a road map on how to create a psychologically healthy workplace and protocols to measure expected outcomes. If those pieces are added to the program, it may stimulate a significant shift in how workplaces operate.

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