*CHAPTER 11*

*Reducing Stress and Improving Workplace Health and Safety*

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# EL 1: Case Challenge: The workplace health and safety committee meeting

Many employees find that they have to go on short or long term disability to deal with mental health issues such as stress and depression. Getting employees back into the work force is a major problem as many employees are reluctant to return to the work environment which they see as causing the problem. The demands of the job, the organizational structure and the physical working environment are other factors which affect whether or not a person will return to work after a stress related, mental health absence from work.

Getting people to return to work is easier said than done. Stress and other mental health related issues are not well understood and there is often a stigma against those who have to take time off. Even though there is a duty to accommodate and assist people reintegrate into the workforce, managers often do not go out of their way to welcome people who left because they were depressed, anxious or substance-abusing.

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The following exercise asks you to respond to some of the issues that managers might face related to stress and wellness and reintegrating employees back to work after short term or long term absence.

**General Setting:**

The Deep River Hydro Company is a public corporation that employs over 10,000 individuals and has total responsibility for power generation in a large region of Australia. Three years ago, at the behest of government, the company undertook a core review and introduced new policy and operational changes to ensure efficiency compliance with national regulations. The underlying current of the review was to focus on implementing new public management practices to make the corporation more business like in its focus.

Since the review, Deep River has experienced a decrease in productivity and an increase in employee medical leaves, particularly stress and depression cases. Both factors are having a negative impact on the company’s bottom line. The union has expressed increasing concerns over efficiency requirements and other the changes and attributes the increase in medical leaves to the takeover and the new management regime.

**Task:**

You (Hope Richardson, the disability manager) have been asked to participate on a workplace health committee to provide suggestions/recommendation to management on reintegrating people in the workforce.

The following are a combination of memos received by your general manager passed along for your consideration and submissions that management invited from all employees. You have prepared an agenda which you would like to follow in addressing each of the following memos:

**Agenda:**

* Ideas for writing a memo to communicate to employees about the need to improve performance. The memo should try to respond to some of the employee complaints.
* Ideas on how our general manager might respond to suggestions from UCTE Employee Survey Results. Specifically, how might we respond to workplace stressors which are affecting absenteeism and presenteeism?
* Ideas for a supervisory and management course on disability management. What would be in the course?
* An employee’s ideas for implementing a workplace wellness program at a low cost
* Management group’s ideas for wellness and performance improvement

In-box incident 1

From: John Rolands, Regional Director, Deep River Power Co.

To: Ken Rundle, General Manager, Deep River Power Co.

Re: Performance Results

I have reviewed the latest quarterly performance reports and must advise I am concerned about the continuing decline in Deep River’s numbers. While I appreciate the introduction of new regulatory conditions along with the organizational and operating policies related to Deep River’ acquisition by Phonex Inc. may have been disruptive, I would expect these would all have been smoothly absorbed by now. Recommendations on how Deep River’s performance will improve in the upcoming quarter are expected in the next few months. .

Unfortunately, the disruptions will continue for a couple of more months and I know this has caused several employees to complain about their increased workloads and other factors.

Perhaps, you might have some suggestions for improving communications and improving the spirit around the company.

In-box incident 2

From: Mary Debolt, Regional Staff Representative, Union of Canadian Telecommunications Employees

To: Ken Rundle, General Manager, Deep River Power Co.

Re: UCTE Employee Survey Results

Following completion of the UCTE employee survey, I am taking the unusual step of highlighting certain results which indicate serious concerns regarding the current working environment and employee wellness. The most significant concerns relate to:

* Changes to long established and safe work practices
* A physical work environment which is unwelcoming
* No opportunity for employee input on work assignments and lack of communication from management
* Project deadlines imposed with insufficient time to complete assignments
* Feeling that relationships with supervisors and work group have deteriorated.

The issues highlighted are classic workplace stressors which are causing concern to employees. They are correlated with absenteeism and presenteeism and probably have an impact on the productivity that you want to improve so badly. If we could get our human organization working, there would be less stress and absenteeism and more productivity.

The survey results reinforce recent, personal observations of mine along with unsolicited comments from numerous employees. We believe the survey results provide clear and compelling evidence that Deep River needs to act immediately.

We would, therefore, expect your full attention to these matters and would hope to hear from you immediately regarding how Deep River plans to rectify the situation.

In-box incident 3

From: Employee A, Deep River Telecom Co.

To: Hope Richardson, Special Projects, Deep River Power Co.

Re: Workplace Wellness Submissions

I have just returned to work after a medical leave of three months. I doubt if I would be here at this time without the support and guidance provided by my supervisor. If more supervisors handled cases of employee absence the way my supervisor did I am sure we would have more people back to work sooner and probably fewer people going off work in the first place.

I know of a couple people who are off work and they say they are not coming back because of their supervisors.

I would recommend to the committee that all managers and supervisors receive training in disability management. The training should include strategies and approaches that are more likely to ensure employees remain at work, how to manage employees who become ill or injured and best practices for returning employees to work.

In-box incident 4

From: Employee B, Deep River Power Co.

To: Hope Richardson, Special Projects, Deep River Power Co.

Re: Workplace Wellness Submissions

I have worked for Deep River for over fifteen years and have never experienced anything like the kind of stress, disruption and confusion I have seen in the last three years. I can assure you employees are working hard to maintain the kind of quality and customer satisfaction that we’ve been known for in the past.

I ran across an article talking about workplace wellness. The organization I was reading about had a strategic objective focused on health and wellness. In order to relax and recharge, employees can take advantage of on-site massage and a quiet room. They have a gym. The company did a lot more and employees liked to come to work.

Ken Rundle asked for suggestions for improving things around here and I have talked to several employees about this idea. I’d like to request that the committee think about this for Deep River Power Co.

In-box incident 5

From: Deep River Telecom Co. Management Committee

To: Hope Richardson, Special Projects, Deep River Power Co.

Re: Workplace Wellness Submission

A group of manager came up with a number of ideas for improving workplace wellness and organizational performance. The following recommendations represent the conclusions drawn from our discussions and deliberations:

Schedule a series of lunch-and-learn sessions covering topics such as safety and accident prevention, maintaining personal health and well being, employee performance plans, company mission and vision, corporate business plan, etc.

* Complete/update employee performance plans
* Communicate employee attendance management policies
* Complete and circulate employee attendance records
* Update all administrative and operating guidelines and performance expectations

# EL 2. Developing a workplace health plan for ‘Student painters’

Each summer, thousands of students engage in painting houses. The jobs are seasonal, and involve full time work, including weekends. The specific skills focus on preparing, cleaning and sanding surfaces to be painted, repairing cracks and holes, and applying paint, wallpaper, and other materials and finishes to exterior and interior surfaces.

In carrying out the job, there are possibilities of several injuries from: falling from ladders, lifting heavy ladders and painting materials, and inhalation of fumes from toxic paints or materials or dusts from sanding off toxic paints.

**Task:**

You are asked to develop workplace health plan in defining management and employee responsibilities for a student works painting organization called Professional Students Painting (PS). You are asked to recognize that your plan is for a 5-6 small teams of student painters working for you. You plan will be a two page document which has the following.[[1]](#endnote-1)

* A policy statement,
* A definition of responsibilities,
* Potential hazards,
* People who are responsible and accountable.
* Workplace hazardous materials guidelines.
* Schedule for inspection, training, and investigating accidents.
* Method of evaluation.

*A policy statement which designates commitment.* This is a set of principles and general guidelines that cover health and safety actions and illustrate a commitment to safety. It can define the health safety philosophy and provide a statement of objectives of the program. For example, the policy statement might summarize management’s commitment:

* Health and safety for our employees comes first. Managers are committed to doing everything possible to prevent injuries and to maintain a healthy work environment. In meeting this goal:
* The company is committed to an occupational health and safety program to implement its health and safety goals.
* The company seeks to involve all employees in integrating workplace health and safety practices into their daily activities.

*A definition of responsibilities.* A plan outlines management’s commitment and employees’ responsibilities as well as defining people who are accountable for certain elements of the program, and examples of substandard health and safety performance. It might define the important of “due diligence” which suggests that everyone has the responsibility to take reasonable precautions to avoid illness and injury. It might also define basic employee rights: **The right to know and identify** hazards and how to protect themselves, **The right to participate** in occupational health and safety decision making, t**he right to refuse** work believed to be unusually dangerous.

*Identification and control of hazards.*  The identification and control of hazards is probably the most important part of the plan. The employer is required to develop an ongoing system for identification of existing and potential risk to health and safety. Health hazards include chemicals, biological, physical hazards such as electricity, work design or ergonomics and stressors such as violence shiftwork. Examples of safety hazards are those things which can cause an injury from slipping, fire, moving parts, working at height, pressure systems, vehicles, lifting, falling materials, unsafe explosives, workplace violence, and working alone. The identification and control of hazards involves using a job safety analysis (JSA): (i) breaking down each job into its steps, (ii) analysing the hazards present at each step, (iii) developing controls for those hazards, (iv) writing safe work procedures based on each analysis, (v) testing, revising, and implementing the written work procedures, (vi) regularly reviewing each job procedure and keeping it current.

*Identifying people responsible.*  The program’s success depends on clearly defined responsibilities and accountabilities. This defines specific employer, managerial, supervisorial and employee responsibilities, as well as the role of the occupational health committee, safety coordinators, owners, contractors, subcontractors, and suppliers. For example, one of the responsibilities of the occupational health committee is to bring together workers’ in-depth practical knowledge of specific jobs and the managers’ ‘big picture’ to provide advice on health and safety matters. The committee monitors the workplace safety system as defined by the health and safety program.

*Including Workplace Hazardous Materials in the plan.*  As all organizations have chemical and biological hazards, the plan should include ways to control these hazards. Search the web for guidelines in this area.

*Inspection, training, and investigating accidents.*  The plan should include a schedule for formal or informal inspection of the work processes and procedures. It provides for training workers and supervisors on safe work procedures and practices, in providing information as well as a practical demonstration that each employee has acquired the skill or knowledge required. The plan also includes a procedure for investigating accidents, dangerous occurrences and a worker’s refusal to work because he or she deemed the situation dangerous.

*Evaluation.*  An evaluation ensures that the program will achieve its objectives and addresses new and emerging issues. The evaluation can focus on whether senior management is involved and sets a good example, the nature and degree of the accidents and emergencies that could occur, and how this compares with others in the industry? The evaluators often review the cleanliness and design of the workplace, if the tools have safeguard and hazard controls, and whether the organization has safety policies, procedures, and plans clearly defined in a plan that people are aware of. The evaluation can review the program’s objectives and measurements, and whether or not the health and safety targets and measurements are clear, crisp, and clearly communicated, and understood. Other features of the evaluation focus in on how the program is integrated into the organization and whether there are reward or incentives for health and safety performance excellence, and it the organization takes steps to ensure managers, supervisors, and workers carry out their responsibilities.

# EL 3. Overcoming resistances in implementing health and safety programs

For some people, designing effective health and safety programs is much more difficult to do than talk about. While managers might feel they don’t have the time to focus on health and safety, employees often resist for many of the same reasons that they have difficulty quitting smoking or taking up a health living style. Health and safety programs require a transformational change in thinking and often require new attitudes and beliefs.

***Your Task:*** You are asked to make recommendations for designing and implementing a health and safety which implements the ideas of this chapter using the following steps of the Force Field analysis.

1. Identify the facilitating and impeding forces that affect the implementation of a health and safety program (name the type of imitative and the context where you want to introduce it). Facilitating forces are those that enhance implementation. Impeding, or restraining forces, are those which inhibit or make it more difficult to implement the the incentive plan.

2. In this exercise, we are asking you to assume that two of the restraining forces are (i) miscommunication and misunderstanding of the purpose of incentive program and what managers intend by adopting it, and (ii) people are motivated by different needs and incentives might be disruptive to their natural motivational goals.

3. Identify the strengths of each of facilitating and impeding force. You can indicate this by the length of the arrows. (Longer arrows indicate more important or stronger forces.)

4. Identify ways to reduce or redirect the restraining forces. For example, workload might be a restraining force – generate ideas to reduce work rather than add to it and record them as facilitating forces.

5. Identify ways to increase the facilitating forces.

6. What are recommendations for reducing the restraining forces and increasing the facilitating forces?

| Facilitating Forces | Impeding Forces |
| --- | --- |
| ……………….  🡺 | * Miscommunication and misunderstanding of the purpose of the program   🡸 |
| ………………  🡺 | * People are motivated by different needs and the program might be disruptive to their motivational goals.   🡸 |
| ………………  ………………  🡺 | ………………………….  🡸 |
| (Present State) | |

# References

1. Setting up an occupational health and safety program: A guide. Labour Relations and Workplace Safety. The material in this section is summarized from the Government of Saskatchewan guide. Accessed at http://www.lrws.gov.sk.ca/ohs-publications/ on August 25, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)