

# **TAKING OWNERSHIP OF TOXIC WORKPLACES: MANAGERIAL SOLUTIONS TO WORKPLACE STRESS**

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*This paper begins with definitions of toxic and healthy workplaces. Signs of social, human, and economic effects of workplace stress are discussed as well as underlying causes. Possible solutions for reducing toxic workplaces are presented with a detailed agenda for creating and implementing programs to ensure that managers take responsibility for reducing stress in their organizations.*

## **Toxic Workplaces and the Canadian Economy**

### **Contrasting Toxic and Healthy Workplaces**

The healthy workplace is characterized by an understanding between management and staff that good health practices result in better outcomes for both organizations and employees. The healthy workplace provides a mutual benefit for both employees and for the organization, with the belief that fulfilling organizational goals cannot happen at the expense of the self-fulfillment of management and staff (HRDC, 2005). The toxic workplace is characterized by high levels of stress that result in physical and emotional harm to management and staff (CCOHS, 2000).

There are many signs that workplace stress is having a detrimental impact on employees as well as on organizational profits. Workplace stress has been attributed to increased staff turnover, poor performance, reduced morale, job loyalty, and innovation (Palmer, 2004; Goetzl, 2003, Danziger & Reinhart, 1994). According to Statistics Canada (2003), workplace stress results in more worry about workplace accidents, an issue that tends to impact male workers more than female workers, and that is exacerbated among shift workers.

Workplace stress costs the Canadian health care system \$6 billion dollars annually, \$1 billion more than is spent annually on eldercare (Kranc, 2004(1)). According to Price (2000(5)), eliminating work-life conflict would reduce visits to the doctor by 25%, hospital visits by 17%, and use of emergency rooms by 23%.

Weeks (2004) indicates that loss of production due to illness and stress costs Canadians \$33 billion annually. Mental and nervous conditions account for 65% of all disability claims of one of Canada's largest insurers. Thirty to forty percent of short-term disability claims are attributable to stress and mental health issues, with the expectation that such claims will grow up

to 70% in the next twenty years (Van den Broek, 2003). Canadians also miss an average of 8.5 days annually from work due to illness (Palmer, 2004; Danziger, et al, 1994; Goetzel, 2003; Dorrell, 2003). These statistics indicate that Canada is facing a toxic workplace crisis.

### **The Health and Wellness Implications of Workplace Stress**

Toxic workplaces have been linked to a myriad of physical health problems as well as psychological and social impacts that have a detrimental impact on employees and their families. Stress has been linked to cardiovascular problems, as well as to obesity, breathing difficulties, and high blood pressure. Skin irritations, including redness, swelling, and rashes can result from increased workplace stress. Back pain, neck pain, headaches, ulcers, fatigue, migraines, and gastrointestinal discomfort have also been linked to stress in the workplace. Changes in metabolism, increased incidence of repetitive strain injuries, and temporary mandibular joint syndrome (jaw-related discomfort) have also been linked to stress. (Goetzel, 2003; Health Canada, 2000; Kranc, 2004(1); Danziger, et al, 1994; Palmer, 2004).

A variety of psychological disorders have been linked to workplace stress. Some of these disorders include eating disorders, increased irritation and emotionality, sleep disorders, anxiety, depression, difficulty concentrating, memory problems, loss of libido, suicidal and homicidal thoughts, loss of self-confidence, and self-esteem (CCOHS, 2000; Danziger, et al, 1994; Health Canada, 2000; Landsbergis, Schurman, Isreal, Schanll, Hugentobler, Cahill & Baker, 1993; Goetzel, 2003; Palmer, 2004).

Such psychological impacts result in social problems. According to Doby and Caplan (1995) and Health Canada (2000), conflict in the workplace is spilling over into the homes of workers, leading to violence and the endangerment of others. A recent study in Toronto revealed that anger rates had risen 900% in only three years within the study group (Sharratt, 2004).

Many employees withdraw socially as a result of social and psychological problems resulting from workplace stress (CCOHS, 2000). One-fifth of Canada's working women suffer from anxiety and depression and 3.7% of all Canadians endure panic disorders (Price, 2004(6), Goetzel, 2003). Workplace stress has been linked to rushing and hyperactive behaviour, as well as boredom and apathy. There is a well-documented link between workplace stress and increased use of stimulants, drugs and alcohol. Canadian spending on pharmaceuticals increased nearly 19% from 2000 to 2001, totaling \$9.2 million (Van Den Broek, 2003). There is also evidence that stress results in increased susceptibility to infectious disease. (Danziger, et al, 1994; CCOHS, 2000). Clearly, toxic workplaces are making Canadians sick.

### **Underlying Causes of Workplace Stress**

Research has addressed the underlying causes of stress in the workplace. There are several conditions that can increase workplace stress. Key problems appear to be linked to management style, reward programs, training programs, employee's work-life balance, legal issues, and cultural expectations.

## **Management Style**

Several aspects of management style contribute to toxic work environments. Stress often comes from an inability to control the way in which one does one's work, particularly if information relevant to job completion is being withheld from the employee, either intentionally or unintentionally. This difficulty may arise from having too many superiors, resulting in a lack of clear guidance being given for task completion (Health Canada, 2000; Weeks, 2004). Firms that tend towards crisis management rather than project management also suffer more from increased workplace stress (Coccia, 1998).

Management issues can be confounded by workplace bullies (those who use pressure to supervise others), excessive workload, and lack of clear role definition for the employee (Health Canada, 2000). For employees to have control over their workplace and to have a more active role in task design and completion, it is important that they have input into decisions that impact their work. The inability to participate in such decisions has been attributed to increased workplace stress (CCOHS, 2000). Having insufficient resources to complete the task can exacerbate this problem. Unrealistic workplace deadlines and demands have often been linked to increased employee stress. This factor seems to impact females more acutely than males in the workplace (Weeks, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2003).

Management's focus on the financial bottom line, regardless of workplace tension, can also result in toxic workplaces, a trend that has been attributed to managerial naiveté regarding the causes, costs, and impacts of workplace stress (Benefits Canada, 2004; Landsbergis, et al, 1993; CCOHS, 2000).

## **Cultural Expectations**

Many firms harbour a culture of long work hours. A Canadian study indicated that 56% of employees claim that their employers relate long workdays to productivity, showing an increase of 15% over a study conducted in 1991 (Van den Broek, 2003). This culture does not allow employees to openly express their need for a more reasonable workday or work week. This is also linked to a culture that views those who complain of stress as weak, or "wimpy". The overriding coping mechanism for workers in such firms is to simply grin and bear it rather than complain and call attention to one's weaknesses, often losing themselves to workplace demands (Palmer, 2004).

In many cases, family needs interfere with work. This interference is becoming more common as more families juggle dual career obligations with family needs and as more employees become mired in the obligations of the sandwich generation, caring for dependent children and elderly relatives. The psychological impacts of feeling isolated in the workplace, or feeling a lack of meaningfulness in the work they do, puts additional pressure on today's employees (Palmer, 2004; Danziger, et al, 1994; Price, 2004(4); CCOHS, 2000).

A 2001 report indicates that there is little overall managerial support for employees trying to achieve a reasonable work-life balance. The study showed that employees who complained about

a lack of work-life balance were frustrated by their immediate manager's actions, as well as by a lack of support from the echelons of upper management (Van den Broek, 2003).

Many employees are faced with the threat of downsizing, which may lead to the fear that complaining about one's working conditions will result in loss of employment earlier, rather than later. This can lead to a perception of lack of equity in the workplace among staff members (Health Canada, 2000; Palmer, 2004; Waxler & Higginson, 1993; Price, 2004(5)).

There is an overall culture in Canada that pressures individuals not to report work-based stress or unfair working conditions. This cultural orientation towards work in society can interact with a workplace orientation that favours working long hours, creating a vicious cycle for stressed out employees trapped within the system.

Current health beliefs focus primarily on lifestyle choices, such as diet and exercise, and their impacts on one's health. The expectation is that health management is an individual responsibility, rather than a societal or corporate responsibility. This belief system overlooks, or minimizes, the impacts of contributing factors to poor health that are outside of the control of the individual. Such contributory factors include economic issues, social conditions, environmental conditions, and workplace stress. The implication is that healthy people can handle such stressors, and that unhealthy people are compromised because of their own poor planning and life management (Felix, 2003). This belief system results in a tendency to blame the victim. It also results in a tendency to treat the symptoms of stress, rather than to eliminate the underlying causes of the problem (Landsbergis, et al, 1993).

### **Other Factors Contributing to Workplace Stress**

Reward programs are designed to motivate staff, but some programs actually create workplace stress, which is counterproductive to motivation. Some individuals respond better to frequent praise and recognition, even if it is done on a daily basis without the use of monetary incentives. Many employees, particularly those who are well-established in their careers and are approaching middle age, prefer honorary rewards that confer status, rather than material rewards such as cash or bonuses. Lack of regular recognition that shows appreciation for their work can be a recurring source of stress for such workers (Weeks, 2004).. As the workforce grows older, more workers are experiencing the need for such frequent recognition and fulfillment.

Being under-promoted, or over-promoted, also contributes to workplace stress. Feeling unprepared to do a particular job also impacts one's self-confidence and self-esteem. In many cases, employees are unable to do the job due to inadequate, or non-existent, employee training programs (Health Canada, 2000; CCOHS, 2000).

Legal issues also create considerable stress for employees when such issues arise. These include such legal infractions as discrimination and harassment. But more fundamental to the matter of workplace stress, and a much more common legal issue impacting such employees, is the legal requirement that demands that workers prove that the workplace caused their illnesses. In a prevailing culture that places health maintenance squarely on the shoulders of the employee, with

little sympathy for their inability to handle stress, this legal requirement places many workers in a no-win situation. A study of employers in the United Kingdom indicated that more than half of those surveyed did not believe that their employees were really suffering from stress-related illness, choosing instead to believe that employees were faking their illness (Salopek, 2005). The impact of these factors on employees with stress-related illnesses is detrimental. Most go on disability leave, or quit work altogether, rather than seeking legal redress, even when they have a viable legal case (Landsbergis, et al, 1993; Health Canada, 2000).

### **Management Solutions to Reduce Workplace Stress**

Does the adoption of programs to reduce workplace stress pay off for firms whose primary focus is the financial bottom line? Researchers indicate that such programs have a profound effect. Firms with such programs in place enjoyed significant increases in annualized results based on a ten year study (Kravetz, 1996). The study revealed that firms that embrace programs related to enhancing employee wellness and reducing workplace stress enjoyed 8.7% greater sales growth, 13.8% greater profit growth, 3.1% greater profit margin growth, 6.0% higher growth in earnings per share, and 10.2% greater overall return on investment.

A critical mandate of management is to attract and retain qualified employees. Many employees remain trapped in stressful workplaces because they feel that they have limited employment opportunities. However, this is going to change. When Baby Boomers retire, there will be more jobs than employees, and Generation Y employees will flood the workplace.

Generation Y employee expectations are more self-focused and less organization-centred. Generation Y workers, born between 1980 and 1995, demand meaningful work in a workplace of committed coworkers who share common values. They focus more on achieving personal goals through work, rather than focusing primarily on achieving organizational goals (Allan, 2004).

Labour force issues are a critical management consideration for industry, organization, and sector growth. Toxic workplaces will not be able to attract and maintain qualified workers. To deal with this issue, it is essential to find ways to eradicate toxic workplace environments by reducing job-based stress.

There are several change strategies that hold the promise of turning toxic workplaces into healthy work environments. These change strategies consist of several approaches, or combinations of approaches, involving changes in management style, resource allocation, training and compensation programs, management education, personal and professional development for management and staff, and enhancements in employee benefits, workplace improvements, and flexibility.

A fundamental issue in helping to overcome workplace stress is seeing that employees have the tools to do the job, from the viewpoint of control over work (Waxler & Higginson, 1993), task-specific knowledge (Weeks, 2004), and workplace resources. Nursing is a profession that has seen tremendous turnover due to increased workplace stress, largely due to a lack of resources and long work hours. However, nursing is not the only profession that suffers from such stressors.

The culture of working long hours, fuelled by fear or obligation, can also be offset by changes in compensation and motivation systems. Waxler and Higginson (1993) argue that one way to eliminate the long hours culture and to make work more efficient is simply to eliminate unnecessary work. This can be done with proper training and supervision, as well as the appropriate use of technology to streamline tasks. One way of dealing with too much overtime, considered to be a key problem for workers in Atlantic Canada, is to pay for overtime with time off, instead of wages (Danziger, et al, 1994). However, while this may be a solution for hourly workers, it does not work effectively for salaried employees. Telecommuting, the ability to work from home, is also a worthwhile approach for some firms that is applicable to both salaried and non-salaried employees (Tangri, 2002).

It is necessary to have realistic goals, workload, and timeframes for task completion (Weeks, 2004; Danziger, et al, 1994). Price asserts that by reducing workload to a moderate level, Canadian firms could eliminate \$3 billion in annual absenteeism costs (2004(3)).

Changes in employee benefits programs are another way to deal with increasing workplace stress. Introducing childcare and eldercare resources, in the form of on-site assistance or flexible work hours, could save \$1.5 billion annually in absenteeism costs in Canadian companies (Price 2000 (1 & 3)). Adopting an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is also a worthwhile venture, providing employees know about the program and what it covers (Buller, 2004; Price, 2004(7); HRDC 2005). A study by HRDC (2005) revealed that many employees did not know enough about their EAP to consider using the services provided. Benefits programs can be enhanced to provide flexible pensions and fringe benefits (Buller, 2004), as well as information on time and stress management (Palmer, 2004).

Changes in the workplace can enhance flexibility, giving employees more control over how and when they work. Shorter work weeks, flexible start and end times, and reasonable shift work schedules all provide ways to enhance flexibility, without inflicting hardship on the firm. Managers should also encourage open and frequent communication from staff members in an environment that fosters mutual consideration and respect (Danziger, et al, 1994; Kranc, 2004(2)). Lack of respect for employees was tagged as a barrier to the success of many organizational programs aimed at reducing workplace stress (Van den Broek, 2003). Social and moral support should be nurtured within the climate of the organization. It is important to provide frequent recognition to staff and suitable opportunities for advancement that are commensurate with an employee's background and experience (Cahill, et al, 1995; Benefits Canada, 2004).

While the focus on toxic workplaces often centres on the employer as the key catalyst in creating workplace stress, the ability of healthy individuals to handle workplace stress more effectively is well-documented. Years ago firms sought to create a healthier labour force by building elaborate in-house fitness centres. Their enthusiasm turned to frustration when they found that such centres were seldom used and that many employees were reluctant to engage in on-site exercise. Today experts recommend that firms keep focusing on how to give employees an opportunity for exercise on the job, but they also recommend keeping it simple. Facilities such as walking trails and inviting outdoor environments are more useful, allowing staff the time for walking,

stretching and even laughing. Laughter leads to relaxation and a happier work environment, resulting reduced workplace stress (CMHA, n.d.).

Employers should work with employees to encourage them to live healthier and happier lives (Danziger, et al, 1994). This can be encouraged by offering more services than facilities, such as smoking cessation programs, weight control programs, creating a Health and Safety Committee, offering wellness programs, and maintaining a smoke free workplace (HRDC, 2005). Care should also be taken to provide a healthy environment in the physical sense, utilizing suitable office ergonomics, sufficient lighting, reasonable noise levels, and room temperature amenable to increased productivity (CCOHS, 2000).

Universities, community colleges and private career training facilities also need to develop and deliver course content related to promoting and maintaining health and wellness in the workplace. Areas of focus should address the following steps advocated by Salopek (2005, p.3).

1. Building awareness of job stress within the organization and its impact upon the firm and its employees.
2. Evaluating working conditions, job satisfaction, and stress levels across the firm, as well as addressing overall health concerns for employees.
3. Building commitment across the organization to program development and support
4. Developing and monitoring programs to reduce workplace stress

Training should also be provided to professionals in the field to give management and staff the ability to develop and conduct such programs in the workplace.

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