TRANSFORMING THE WORKPLACE

Ten Strategies Can Help Increase Employee Satisfaction

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More than half of U.S. working people view job stress as a major problem in their lives, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.[1] What's worse, more than 29 percent put themselves in the highest stress category—"extreme or quite a bit"—the highest percentage recorded since the Marlin Company, a workplace research firm, began surveying employees on job satisfaction issues six years ago.[2]

The mood among staff members of health care organizations is equally troubling. A 2001 study of 43,329 nurses at 711 hospitals revealed that a third said they planned to leave their jobs within the next three years.[3] More than 43 percent of them scored high on a survey measuring emotional exhaustion. Last year the chairman of the American Medical Association's board of trustees said in a speech that "physicians throughout the country have been pushed to the breaking point" by exhaustion and intense frustration arising from the business aspects of medicine.[4]

What strategies can strengthen morale in U.S. health care organizations? How can health care leaders create an environment where work motivation is high and job turnover is low?

10 PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

Here are 10 *practical* strategies that can be implemented with minimal financial expenditures.

Create an Ethical Work Environment If you want to build a great work environment, focus on ethics. The reason is simple: Slightly more than half of working Americans question their bosses' integrity; when they do, they are likely to leave their jobs.[5]

The importance of being honest with employees cannot be overemphasized. Employees hunger for the truth, and when they hear it are grateful. "I admire my department head," a laboratory technician told me one day. "She is honest. I don't always agree [with her], but I never have to worry about whether she is telling the truth." Author Tom Peters was correct when he observed: "The boss who'll survive is going to have to learn how to do this amazing thing—which rarely happens in corporate America—tell the truth. . . . I really think that the great defense in the world against cynicism is truth-telling."[6]

Is it possible to be honest when failure occurs? Several years ago, Ciba-Geigy, the Swiss chemical firm, sponsored a major drug-research effort that had a potential for large sales. Then a laboratory technician noticed something amiss in the livers of test animals. Although the drug did have healing properties, it also left in the liver cholesterol deposits that produced irreversible damage. Disheartened, the research team canceled the project. Team members feared that the company's management would see them as failures.

However, Frank Douglas, the company's head of research, acted quickly. He congratulated the team for creating a climate that allowed a member with the lowest status to raise an issue capable of derailing a major project. "By listening and following through, you saved untold misery and substantial financial losses that would have occurred if this drug wrongly made it to market," he told team members.[7] Douglas affirmed their success even in a failed undertaking: "[I] will make sure you have the time to write up your learning for professional journals and get the recognition you deserve for your fine work," he said. "Then I'll reassign you to new projects."

An organization seeking to build strong work teams should be honest not only about its positive aspects but its challenges as well. When failure occurs, such organizations acknowledge it,

learn from it, and move on.

Institute a Mentoring Program To build a great work environment, nurture what might be called your "dormant" leadership. This is best done through a strong, vibrant mentoring program.

Where does the word "mentor" come from? At the start of Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus, the king of Ithaca, is preparing to leave home for the Trojan War. He asks his wise and trusted counselor, Mentor, to serve as protector and guardian of the family. Odysseus is then gone 10 years, and during that time Mentor becomes the teacher, advisor, friend, and surrogate father of Odysseus' son. Thus the word's origins.

Today one of the fastest growing practices in management is the establishment of mentoring teams that enable new employees to learn from those with experience. The benefits are many. New employees learn the organization's mission, values, and culture. They become acquainted with the complexity of the challenges facing their employer. Best of all, through mentoring new employees come to understand their own potential, as has been noted by Scott Adams, the creator of the comic strip *Dilbert*.

> When I was trying to become a syndicated cartoonist [he has written], I sent my portfolio to one cartoon editor after another and received one rejection after another. One editor even called to suggest that I take art classes. Then Sarah Gillepsie, an editor at United Media and one of the real experts in the field, called to offer me a contract. At first, I didn't believe her. I asked if I'd have to change my style, get a partner—or learn how to draw. But she believed that I was already good enough to be a nationally syndicated cartoonist.
>
> Her confidence in me completely changed my frame of reference; it altered how I thought about my own abilities. This may sound bizarre, but from the minute I got off the phone with her, I could draw better. You can see a marked improvement in the quality of the cartoons I drew after that conversation.[8]

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generated, and energy begins to flow through the organization.

To be sure, it is sometimes difficult to be passionate about one's job, especially when problems accumulate. The mark of a great leader, however, is to not lose one's enthusiasm; if enthusiasm wanes, there is a loss of respect.

In 2001 John Boles, the manager of the Florida Marlins baseball team, was fired. This occurred one day after a player criticized Boles and his coaching staff for their lack of major league playing experience. In explaining the decision to terminate the manager's employment, General Manager Dave Dombrowski said, "Boles felt that he had lost the clubhouse."[10] Dombrowski went on to say that when a leader loses the respect of his team, the future cannot be bright.

No leader can afford to lose the "clubhouse"— the respect of employees. What builds respect? Creative planning, skilled financial management, and providing feedback in a timely manner all help. However, the best way to cultivate employees' respect is to be passionate about the organization and its priorities. In 2000 Colin Powell, then a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who was considering a possible campaign for president, finally decided against it, saying, "George W. Bush is passionate about politics. Al Gore is passionate about politics. I'm not passionate about politics. I'm passionate about being a soldier."[11]

I say this with some feeling: If you want to build a great work environment, be passionate about your work. I have yet to find a truly great hospital or public health agency that did not have passionate leadership.

Give Employees a Break Insist that they take every vacation day awarded to them. Why is this important? Many are exhausted from their job responsibilities. According to the Families and Work

To transform itself, an organization must cultivate a new generation of leaders. Who will benefit from this? Young employees will benefit, to be sure. But mentors will benefit as well, as was noted by the philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who wrote: "The future belongs to those who give the next generation reason for hope."[9]

Be Passionate When leaders are passionate about their jobs, respect is

Institute, 54 percent of employees feel over-worked and 55 percent feel overwhelmed by how much they are asked to do.[12]

To keep an organization renewed, break the routine. Send staff to professional conferences so that they can be intellectually invigorated. Provide sabbaticals, an increasingly popular "perk" for the employees of Fortune 500 companies. [13] And insist that, when a vacation is taken, the briefcase is left behind. Why? According to a survey conducted by Oxford Health Plans, one in six U.S. workers is so overworked that he or she is unable to use up his or her accrued vacation time.[14] Forty percent of employees who do take vacations *work* on them and are in daily contact with their employers.[15] When they return to their regular jobs, they find that the well of vitality has been barely replenished.

One important way of giving employees a break is to provide them with flexible work schedules. Laurel Cutler, vice chairman of Foote Cone & Belding, says: "I wish I had known sooner that if you miss a child's play or performance or sporting event, you will have forgotten a year later the work emergency that caused you to miss it. But the child won't have forgotten that you weren't there. I learned it, but not in time for my own kids. I was a very good boss in that respect though. By the time I had a number of young parents working for me, I would tell them, 'It's more important to be there for your child.'"[16]

If you want to build a great work environment, encourage employees to take vacations and tend to their families. So say the leaders of firms that consistently turn up in lists of "America's favorite places to work." In such companies turnover is low, morale is high, and employees say that their employer encourages them to have a life outside of work.[17]

Preserve Some "White Space" The great violinist Itzhak Perlman was once confronted by a fan who said, "Mr. Perlman, my son is studying the violin. And by coincidence he is studying the same composer and composition that you played tonight. Why is it that when my son plays this piece it doesn't sound the same as when you play it? After all, you both use the same set of notes!" Perlman is reported to have said: "It's not the notes that count, but the space between the notes." Quoting Perlman, the organizational the-orist Richard Oliver goes on to say that "the space between the notes is the 'white space' in an organization, the way things really get done rather than the way the policy and procedure manual says they are supposed to get done."[18]

Of course, "notes" are important. But equally important is giving employees the freedom—the "white space"—they need to accomplish their goals in the context of the organization's priori-ties. That's what 3M, St. Paul, MN, does and why it is perceived as one of the most innovative companies in the world. Scientists at the compa-ny are allowed to spend up to 15 percent of their work time on their own projects (the enormously successful Post-it Notes were developed in this way by a 3M researcher). If you want to have an organization that operates at peak performance, leave your employees white space.

Share the Credit Robert W. Woodruff, president of Coca-Cola from 1938 to 1956, was a visionary leader who made his company's product popular around the world. Woodruff's most memorable advice on leadership is inscribed on a marble wall at the Atlanta-based firm's entrance: "Man can accomplish great success if he doesn't care who gets the credit."[19]

Several years ago, the Health Administration Department at the University of Minnesota was designated one of the top such programs in the nation. During a ceremony announcing the des-ignation, the department chair praised everyone in the room by name and indicated how each had contributed to winning the award. Seeing that their contributions were recognized, members and employees of the department felt a deep sense of pride.

On July 15, 1982, Don Bennett, a Seattle busi-nessman, became the first amputee ever to climb Mount Rainer. Aided by a team of people who were determined not to let him fail, Bennett climbed 14,410 feet on one leg and two crutches, though it took him four days to do it. When asked to state the most important lesson he learned while climbing the mountain, Bennett said without hesitation, "You can't do it alone."[20]

Health care leaders who want to create great work environments know they can't do it alone. When performance slides, they shoulder responsi-bility themselves; when success is achieved, they make sure that the credit goes to others.

Build a Community When told that most North Americans pipe water into their homes, a Nigerian woman grew somber. "How do the women speak to one another? If I didn't talk with the women at the village well, I wouldn't know about their lives."[21]

We sometimes forget how important a sense of community is to employees. Yet it is well docu-mented that what employees seek in a workplace is a sense of respect and a feeling of being con-nected to others.[22]

Can a sense of caring be developed in large organizations? Is it possible to create a climate in which employees recognize each other's worth

and celebrate the joys of work as well as the disappointments? The answer is a resounding yes. I think, for example, of Federal Express, which has made extraordinary efforts to build loyalty throughout the company's ranks. FedEx employees believe that the firm's success rests on their shoulders. The result is a sense of caring that begins in the executive suite and runs from middle management to the drivers faithfully delivering their parcels. In 2002 a FedEx employee named Steve Gibes died at the age of 30.[23] His supervisors and co-workers wanted to do something special in his memory, for he was a valued employee. Gibes' casket was carried to the cemetery in a FedEx truck, the logo of which was covered. Behind the lead truck came a fleet of FedEx vehicles transporting employees to the funeral. FedEx provided transportation to any employee wanting it, which meant that schedules had to be adjusted for 75 of the company's routes. That morning 50 drivers had gotten up at the crack of dawn in order to finish their routes in order to attend the funeral.

The story tells much about Steve Gibes. But it is also the story of a company that shows compassion. If you want to transform your workplace, build community. Do it for humanitarian reasons, but do it also for the bottom line. One important reason why employees leave an organization is that they don't feel that they belong or, to put it another way, that they don't feel a sense of community.[24] Show kindness. Express appreciation. Celebrate meaningful events. When you do those things, a sense of pride bubbles forth throughout the workforce.

Develop a Sanctuary There are two types of sanctuaries, *public* and *private*. In a hospital, a public sanctuary might be a room set aside, giving visitors a place to pray or meditate. At the center of the University of Minnesota's Academic Health Center is a small chapel that is used every day. On September 11, 2001, the chapel had a steady stream of employees. Physicians meditated with nurses; executives prayed alongside custodians. The chapel was a refuge in the time of storm.

Every organization needs a public sanctuary—a place of quiet and renewal. Today we are all so surrounded by fax machines, pagers, cell phones, and

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other similar devices that we have trouble finding the time or place for reflection. In 2001 Amtrak received so many complaints about cell phone use during an early-morning commuter train run to New York City that it added a "quiet car."[25] Riders liked the idea so much that some 20 additional "quiet cars" have since been added to the Washington-Boston route.

We all need "quiet cars" in our lives—places that help steady the mind and calm the soul. Such sanctuaries may be public: a chapel or meditation room, for example. However, the more important sanctuaries are private ones: a sustaining e-mail message from a friend, an inspiring prayer, an encouraging note from a colleague.

Ronald Heifetz is one of the world's leading authorities on leadership. He knows from his own experience the importance of sanctuaries. He told an interviewer: "One sanctuary that I recently developed for myself involves getting an e-mail that's sent out by a rabbinic friend, who's a mystic and a biblical scholar. Every day he sends out an interpretation of one word from the Bible. It's just a few screens long, but as I'm going through my e-mail every day, I take a few minutes to read this thing, and it roots me in a different reality, a different source of meaning."[26]

Periodically all of us need to be rooted in a different reality. If September 11, 2001, can be said to have left a positive legacy, it is that Americans are seeking to redefine their priorities. "In this age of terrorism I can intellectually accept that I could end up in a pile of rubble," a New Yorker told a reporter soon after the attack, "but I can't accept that I would be in that rubble not having lived life to its fullest."[27]

Create a Cause, Not a Business We now come to an important strategy for transforming organizational life: reaffirming the importance of our healing mission. Unfortunately, in a world where financial constraints loom large, it is easy to forget what the French call *raison d'etre* ("reason for existence"). Some critics suggest that the *raison d'etre* of health care—caring for sick or injured people—is being lost.

Of course, health care is in one sense a business. But it is the business of helping others.

How do you keep the vision of healing the sick and caring for the less fortunate alive? Health care leaders must manage by spending time with employees, giving them encouragement, and reminding them of the importance of their work. But it is also essential to reward those who quietly and without fanfare are keeping the vision alive. Who are these people? One is the middle-level manager who works tirelessly to achieve the organization's mission. Another is the development officer who strives to augment the revenue streams. Still another is the nurse who gives compassionate care, often without being given recognition for it. Yet another is the receptionist who realizes that the tone of her voice is part of the healing process.

There is a difference, one business executive has noted, between the "leader by title" and the "leader by profile."[28] Leaders by profile are those who exert the biggest influence on the organization: They are the people who get things done. Sometimes high-profile leaders have humble job titles. But, because they get things done, they are the ones who should be rewarded.

Remember: Spirituality in the Workplace Matters In 2001 a Gallup Poll asked Americans if they felt a need to experience spiritual growth. Seventy-eight percent said yes, a big jump from the 20 percent who had said that in 1994.[29] Nearly half of the respondents said they had occasion to talk about their faith in the workplace in the previous 24 hours. "Spirituality in the workplace is exploding," said Laura Nash, a Harvard Business School research fellow who has followed the topic for a decade.[30]

Why the interest in spirituality? Employees want their values and religious traditions respected. They want sanctuaries where their spirits can be healed. And they want interpersonal conflicts settled. Today 32 percent of all employees face serious conflicts at work, often with their supervisors.[31] Such conflicts reduce productivity and undermine morale. What's more, they wound those involved in them, leaving a trail of hurt and spiritual discomfort.

What can be done to diminish such conflicts? Respecting individual differences is a starting point. Seeing the best in colleagues helps. From my perspective, however, the most important thing that can be done is to keep in focus our calling: healing and providing hope for the ill. ◻

NOTES

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