

Introduction

Do we wait for the perfect workplace to be created? Or, can we do something now to be part of that creation, and to thrive in the process?

In this email, I share some key points from my workshop, "Thriving in The Workplace" (Note 1), which helps participants to understand the role they can play in creating productive, healthy, collaborative organisations.

Thriving In The Workplace

The inspiration for this email and the workshop and comes from clients who have raised concerns about how they can balance their well-being (and their colleagues') and the need to get the job done and produce results. These conversations sometimes also covered the 'nirvana' topic i.e. when we have the perfect organisation, then everything will be OK.

Nirvana & Utopia

In this month's AFR Boss Magazine, Carl Rhodes (Associate Professor of Management at the University of Technology, Sydney) wrote about utopia: "...we're telling ourselves that work should and can be a place where people and organisations achieve dizzy heights of success and personal fulfilment at levels never seen before. Management gurus' versions of work promises a new utopia...". He also commented that "the reason cynicism about work might be so rife is that work tries to promise more than it could ever possibly deliver. The utopian hyperbole that infuses popular management discourse provides organisational models that are, at their root, beyond the possible."

The Reality Of The Workplace

Contrast utopia with reality: the reality is that we work in organisations that are not perfect. Imperfections are everyday realities, e.g.

- ◆ Poorly managed change
- ◆ Difficult colleagues, bosses
- ◆ Deadlines and pressure
- ◆ Poor company policies
- ◆ Emotionally insensitive staff and leaders

Pain

These realities all cause pain: "Pain is a fact of organisational health" (2). Pain impacts the organisation in many ways, e.g.

- ◆ Disruption to work
- ◆ Decreased productivity
- ◆ Staff loss, reduced staff loyalty
- ◆ Poor morale
- ◆ Reduced quality of work

What Can Be Done

We might not achieve utopia, but we can make an attempt. How can we contribute towards creating a healthy workplace and managing pain? A number of preventative and reactionary 'handling' mechanisms can be put in place. For example:

- ◆ Support the staff who do the 'invisible' work
- ◆ Be alert to the fact that most people at some point have 'pain' issues - connect with these people
- ◆ Support collaboration and connection initiatives
- ◆ Choose to employ the right kinds of employees
- ◆ Build fair-minded workplaces which inspire trust and integrity
- ◆ Have role models
- ◆ Cut out the causes of pain, where possible

Why Bother?

There are some 'hard' benefits from dealing with what might appear as 'soft' issues. Many studies have found a correlation between a harmonious workplace and a company's profits. Making an effort to manage pain:

- ◆ Is good leadership
- ◆ Increases staff morale, loyalty and retention
- ◆ Improves productivity and quality of work
- ◆ Reduces down time
- ◆ Reduces stress

["Without compassion you can't come to understand the stakes you're asking other people to give up" \(3\)](#)

Notes

(1) This workshop is inspired by the book "Toxic Emotions At Work" by Peter Frost (2003), and other related research and experiences on healthy workplaces.

(2) "Toxic Emotions At Work: How Compassionate Managers Handle Pain and Conflict", Peter Frost (2003),

(3) From "Leading with an Open Heart" (2002) by Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky (Ronald A. Heifetz is founding director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Marty Linsky teaches at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, where he chairs several of the School's executive programs on leadership.)

About This Article

My aim is to provide you with information to assist you at work, with your own development, and in developing your staff. The theme for 2004 is 'Building Collaborative Workplaces'. Each month I concentrate on an area based on topics raised by my clients. Material is drawn from journals, books, articles and shared experiences.

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