

What Managers Do to Create Healthy Work Environments

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to determine what successful managers do to create healthy work environments in a healthcare organization. Managers using exemplary behaviors were selected and interviewed based on employee satisfaction surveys, and focus groups were conducted with employees who worked for them. Effective managers were found to create healthy work environments through behaviors included in three categories: Setting the Climate, Keeping Performance on Track, and Tapping Employee Potential. A healthy work environment was defined, and a model was developed. This model can be the template for leadership training and made an expected part of managerial behavior and competency development.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to better understand the managerial behaviors that create healthy work environments. Creating healthy work environments (HWE) is important because organizations with HWE may be more successful and because employees should be able to work in humane, rewarding work situations. Identifying these behaviors is essential for human resource development professionals who wish to design supportive managerial learning programs.

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Creating healthy workplaces is fundamental for retaining employees and sustaining motivation. This is especially important for the healthcare industry. The American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) has created a strategic initiative to deal with the profound problem of the nursing shortage in healthcare. “Creating healthy work environments in the hospital setting is imperative to improving patient safety and staff retention and recruitment” (AACN Public Policy, 2005).

Research shows evidence that the work climate affects organizational success (Ballou, Godwin, & Shortridge, 2003; May, Lau, & Johnson, 1999; Patterson, Warr, & West, 2004). Evidence suggests that the best to work for companies may be more productive than counterparts who are not (Ballou, et. al., 2003; Levering & Moskowitz, 2005, Levering, Moskowitz et al. 2006), and companies having employees with positive workplace attitudes have higher market values than those that do not (Ballou, et. al.2003). Chambers, Foulon, Handfield-Jones, Hankin, and Michaels (1998) claim that organizations will have to create a successful employee value proposition in order to successfully attract and retain talent in an increasingly free agent workforce, and Boverie and Kroth (2001) use the term “occupational intimacy” (p. 71) to describe a passionate work environment.

Transforming organizations into places that are both productive and humane may, then, be the two keys to creating successful, sustainable, healthy working environments. Leaders must perceive a positive climate as a productivity factor if they are to provide the resources and support required. People in positions of power are otherwise more likely to revert to shorter-term, more punitive work practices. Workplaces must also be healthy in order to garner the most creative energy from employees.

Organizations are finding it an increasingly free-agent marketplace for skilled talent. The healthcare industry has been particularly hard hit. Nursing shortages make headline news. Healthcare institutions are scrambling to hire, keep, and motivate healthcare workers. In this setting, the purpose of this exploratory study was to examine managerial behaviors that create motivating and healthy workplaces.

Methods

Managers working for a healthcare organization were selected based on employee satisfaction surveys. This organization is comprised of acute care hospitals, a long-term care facility, medical clinics, and a health plan.

Interviews with these managers were completed and focus groups then conducted with employees who worked for them.

Twenty-five managers were chosen based on selected high-employee satisfaction survey scores in their work area. They represented a cross-section of the organization, including managers in urban hospitals, rural hospitals, medical clinics, and the health plan. Each was invited to participate in this study. Interviews were completed with 21 of these leaders.

Data Collection

One-hour interviews with the 21 selected managers were the primary data collection source for this study. The interviews were focused on identifying the specific behaviors managers utilize in the workplace to create healthy work environments and to collect examples of how those behaviors have been employed in their work areas. Two focus groups were conducted to add depth of understanding and to check the validity of the managers' self-reported behaviors. They were voluntarily populated by employees who worked for these leaders.

Interviews

An interview guide was sent to each selected manager prior to the meeting so the manager had time to reflect upon possible responses. Questions included asking what they do to create healthy working environments, how they assure that their employees understand the expectations of their jobs, how they make sure their employees' opinions count, how they involve their employees in decisions that affect them, and how they give employees regular feedback. After each question, the participant was asked to describe specific behaviors or examples of how they accomplished these activities. After the data were analyzed, it was presented to interviewees along with the models that emerged to check for validity and authenticity.

Focus Groups

Participants were asked to identify what their managers had done well in the past to create healthy working environments in their work areas. Those top-of-the-mind responses were quickly listed on a flip chart until all

participants had exhausted their topics. Individuals were then asked to describe what their manager does in more detail. These responses were captured in hand written notes by an outside recorder. At the end of an hour employees were thanked for their time and the meeting was adjourned.

Data Analysis

Individual interviews were transcribed, and responses were grouped by the questions that were asked. They were then iteratively grouped until categories of responses within those initial questions emerged. Responses that fit more appropriately within another question were moved. This process continued until an overall categorization scheme emerged. The focus group responses that were captured via flip charts and handwritten notes were transcribed. They were then iteratively grouped until categories of responses emerged.

Results

The results are reported by the dimensions, categories and subcategories that emerged from the responses. There were three overarching dimensions, which were called: Setting the Climate, Keeping Performance on Track, and Tapping Employee Potential.

Setting the Climate

Setting the Climate was defined as establishing conditions for a robust work environment. Ten behavioral categories comprised this dimension. These categories were behaviors of the exemplary managers who set a healthy work climate. They are:

1. *Giving employees autonomy and avoiding micromanaging.*
2. *Encouraging and giving permission to have a fun, humorous atmosphere.* This included having managers who were fun and humorous themselves and allowing and encouraging fun and humor in others.
3. *Putting people in jobs they enjoy.* This included making sure employees were in the right jobs for their skills, talents, and interests.
4. *Good communication with employees.* This included sharing useful information, using a variety of methods of

communication (such as emails, memos, meetings), having an open-door policy, and being a promoter of open communication.

5. *Treating employees as people, without hierarchy and fairly.* This included such behaviors as letting employees see the managers as a real person, knowing employees on a personal level, making sure that no one (including the manager) was allowed to act in a superior or disrespectful manner, and trying to treat people fairly and equitably.
6. *Celebrating events and encouraging social activities in departments.* These behaviors included managers who ate with employees at times, honored special times for employees, had purely social events, and offered opportunities for celebrations in the office, especially to recognize employees.
7. *Having an ability to solve problems.* These behaviors included encouraging employees to come to the managers to resolve problems quickly, sitting down and listening to employees' problems, and having people work through interpersonal and team issues directly and together.
8. *Being an enthusiastic role model.* This included having a passion for work, being positive and friendly with employees, and setting a great example.
9. *Making sure employees have what they need to get the job done.* This involved responding to employee needs quickly, making sure they have the resources they need, and providing a safe and healthy physical work environment. It also meant being an advocate for employees in the larger environment, providing for employee learning and growth needs, acting as a mentor, giving encouragement, making employees feel valued, and helping with emotional support when employees need it.
10. *Being accessible.* Exemplary managers are approachable, visible to employees, and available.

Keeping Performance on Track

Keeping Performance on Track is defined as making sure employees know what they want, letting them know how they are doing, and being

very clear about expectations. There were three categories in this dimension: Starting Right, Having On-going Support Mechanisms, and Checking Employee Progress.

Starting Right involves being clear about expectations before people are hired. This was shown through behaviors such as describing the organization and expectations clearly from the beginning of or even before employment. Responses included meeting with new employees personally, making sure they go through new employee orientation, and giving them a mentor or preceptor to guide them at the beginning.

The second category of behaviors for keeping performance on track is Having On-going Support Mechanisms available. This included having staff meetings and the availability of on-going learning. Regular meetings were used to reinforce manager expectations. One-on-one meetings facilitate clearing up problems, setting expectations, and giving feedback on progress. Sending employees to training and having the right tools and materials available provides important support.

The last category is Checking Employee Progress. This involves making sure that the progress of employees is checked in a timely manner. Having benchmarks and metrics helps to provide a measure of their progress.

Exemplary managers give employees feedback which helps employees grow and develop. Behaviors that were cited included giving feedback right away and regularly; making sure the feedback is direct, honest and provides tough information about their performance; and making sure that bad news is delivered individually. Exemplary managers also express appreciation by catching employees when they are doing the work in the right way and thanking them publicly and personally. They also post results, metrics, and information for others to see and appreciate. Another behavior that exemplary managers employ is using feedback as a learning opportunity, asking such things as, "What could we do differently next time?"

Tapping Employee Potential

Behaviors that tap into employee potential included using teams and group meetings to solve problems affecting the employees. This includes providing support for employee ideas by encouraging and reinforcing their initiative to problem solve, actively pursuing issues employees believe to be important, asking for employees' opinions and allowing them to follow-through on solving problems. These managers consistently brought

important issues to the employees instead of keeping things from employees.

Asking employees to make work decisions set the exemplary managers apart. These managers let employees plan and deal with issues around their work schedules, solicited employees' ideas regarding work problems, and helped employees solve interpersonal issues at work.

Employee Focus Groups

The results are reported by the categories that emerged from the responses given in the two focus groups. The focus groups were made up of employees of the interviewed "exemplary managers". They were asked what their managers do to help create a healthy work environment.

The most frequently mentioned behaviors were that their managers communicated effectively, had an open-door policy, stood up for employees, interacted on both a personal and social level, supported a work-life balance, recognized contributions and accomplishments, and followed through on their promises. They also mentioned behaviors such as making employees feel like they were part of a team, having regular meetings, saying thank you, getting to know the staff, celebrating successes, being willing to try different ways of doing things, setting a good example, being fair, finding out the whole story in disputes, and not micro-managing.

Responses were then grouped into six categories. These were communicating well; making employees feel like they count; having clear job expectations; interacting on a personal, social, and fun level; setting the example; and showing no favoritism.

Comparing Manager and Employee Responses

Every category mentioned by employees in the focus groups has a corresponding category, and often several that are related, mentioned by managers in interviews. This indicates that what managers think they do to create healthy work environments are some of the things they actually do to create them. The employee categories included: Communicates, Sets the example, Has clear job expectations, Interacts on a personal level, and Has no favoritism. Similarly, the manager categories included: Communicates, Sets the example, Has clear job expectations, Has fun, Has lots of social activities and celebrations, and Treats employees fairly as people with a hierarchy.

Discussion

The data analysis for this project was interesting because it became difficult to place behaviors into one or the other of the Feedback or the Expectations sections--many could have fit into either. So we had to think about what the relationship between those two managerial activities might be. We came to the conclusion (a) that they were both related to keeping performance on track and (b) that it was an iterative process of setting the expectations and then letting people know if they were meeting expectations or not. The data was organized around that relationship and we called it Keeping Performance on Track.

Similarly, it was difficult deciding whether some activities were more related to involving employees in making decisions or in seeking their views about what decisions would be made. We concluded (a) that this was a process of tapping into what employees felt should be done and sometimes asking them to decide what should be done and (b) that the two activities are related and hard to separate. The data were organized around the "sharing" and the "doing", and we called it Tapping into Employee Potential, recognizing that there is more to human potential than just getting ideas and making decisions. Every instance of involving employees in decisions is a case when employee's opinions count.

What emerged from outside the four specific areas of inquiry--expectations, feedback, opinions, and decisions--were the whole range of activities that set the tone for the working environment. We called those activities Setting the Climate. You can share the expectations, give feedback, ask for opinions, and involve people in decisions all day long, but if employees are not having fun, do not feel like their manager cares about them, are over managed, and so on, they will not perceive themselves to be in a healthy work environment.

The focus groups validated what the managers had been telling us. They described the same behaviors as the managers did, often using the same examples.

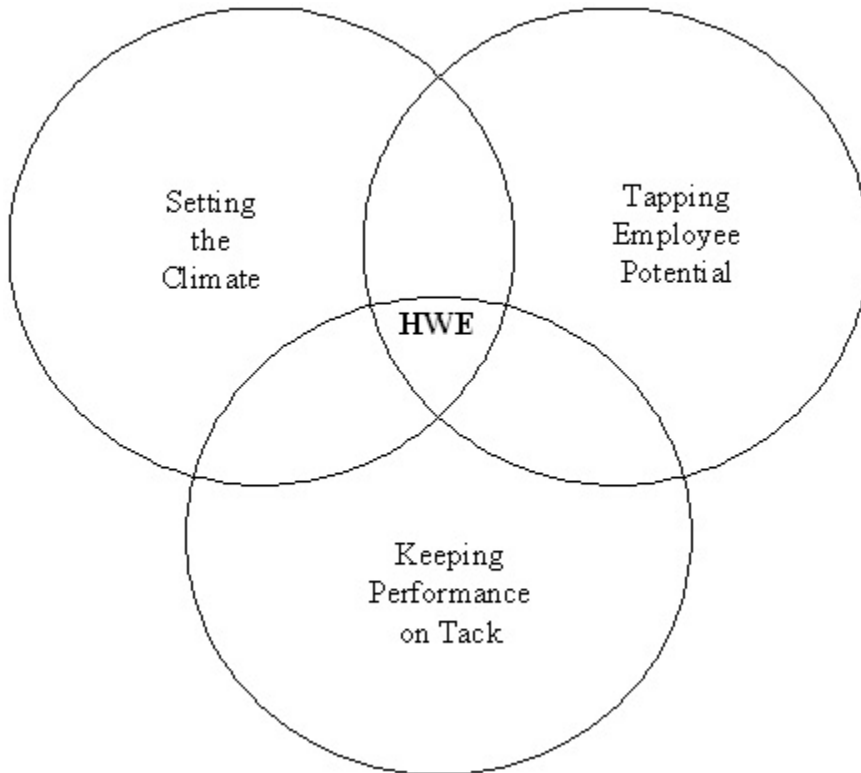
There were hundreds of actions noted describing how exemplary managers create healthy work environments. Some seemed so self-evident. Yet both employees and managers agreed on the behaviors that, for employees, creates a healthy work environment. In the future it would be interesting to interview managers at the bottom of the employee satisfaction survey results to see how many, if any, of these behaviors they say they use.

The identified strategies are behaviors--things you can actually see

people do--and they can be learned skills. Though it is hard to fake sincerity, it is relatively easy to get a group together to kick around ideas about how to rethink the work schedule.

The healthy work environment model (see Figure 1) that came out of the data is really an outline that managers wishing to make their environments healthier can use. It could also be used--to borrow from one of the anchor points of this study--to set expectations for managerial behaviors in other healthcare organizations.

Figure 1: Healthy Workplace Environment Model



The HWE model that emerged was gathered from specific questions around feedback, expectation, making opinions count, and involving

employees in decisions, in addition to the grand tour question about how managers create healthy work environments. Therefore, it must be viewed in that context. What a “healthy work environment” is, however, was never defined in this study. We purposefully did not define it for those being interviewed. Our assumption is that people carry inside themselves a working definition of it. By asking what behaviors managers utilize to create one, they have begun to define it for us.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Some managers inside this healthcare organization know how to create healthy work environments. The HWE model that emerged from this study could be incorporated into organizational managerial and leadership training--modified to align with existing organizational initiatives and values. Further, these behaviors could be made an expected part of managerial behavior in an organization.

The list of behaviors described by managers is an encyclopedia of activities that supervisors could draw upon if incorporated into managerial development programs. They could also be used as a checklist that any supervisor could use as an outline for creating a healthy work environment in a specific area. The behaviors identified in this study begin to provide evidence of the practices that are necessary for building and sustaining healthy work environments.

The healthy workplace environment categories these managers practice are supported by Lowe, et. al (2003) who found the strongest correlates of a healthy work environment to be good communication, social support, and strong job demands. Additionally, Heath, Johanson, and Blake (2004) found in a similar study of nursing leaders that in order to set the tone for healthy work environments, having effective communication, having collaborative relationships, and promoting decision making among nurses increased job satisfaction. The comprehensive model we propose targets these working conditions and work relationships that build strong and healthy organizations.

Further study could involve similar data gathering from the employee population. What do employees do to create and support healthy work environments? Also, it would be a useful experiment to choose a work location or locations as a case study for incorporating the healthy work environment model and related behaviors to see to what extent it would make a difference for a specific work group.

Creating healthy work environments is important for all organizations, not just the healthcare industry. The evidence is mounting for expanding our understanding of what creates healthy work and for creating environments where employees find meaningful work that is enjoyable and where they feel nurtured and cared about as well.

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