

Managing Under the Microscope: The Next Tsunami of Environmental Disasters in the Workplace

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There is a new wave of environmental disasters that are just beginning to splash onto our daily news feeds. Workplace cultures are the next targets that will be publicly examined and debated in excruciating detail - just ask the CBC, Amazon, or the Lance Armstrong “company machine.” All the dirty laundry of inappropriate behaviours and unacceptable people practices are flooding out in the wash, and every detail is being hung out on the public line to view. However, that’s just the trickle before the tsunami wave that will expose these environmental toxins that currently live in some form or another in vast numbers of organizations.

The human toll is difficult to tabulate, as the toxic waste manifests itself in polluted work environments and it lives and breeds where inefficient business practices, ineffective managers and bad employee attitudes are allowed to roam and run free. Where these toxins live and breed is a force to be reckoned with and containing or eliminating the poison is tricky business. However, not addressing this in a proactive manner has now become very risky business. Like the killer-force of the tsunami, it can destroy carefully crafted and nurtured company brands and can stop business dead in its wake.

Under the Microscope - Macro Management

Perhaps it’s the anti-bullying campaign that is bringing these issues to light, or we are finally connecting the dots to the skyrocketing claims of workplace stress. Unfortunately these toxins don’t just end in the workplace, they continue to multiply and seep into our homes, families, and communities. The result is a reactionary health care cost of monumental proportions that none of us can afford to pay.

“Germ identification” in toxic workplaces are known to contain all or some of the following: abuse or misuse of power; lack of accountability; inept leadership; poor planning and organizing; misaligned skill sets; bad judgment and decision-making; inappropriate use of money and resources; and ineffective organizational structures. And yet, all of this happens amidst and in spite of, an exploding spider web of rules, regulations and laws, and it continues to grow.

Yes, the definition of insanity still stands relevant today by doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. But once again, a whole new regulatory industry is emerging to address the reactive symptoms of bullying in the workplace, rather than developing a comprehensive strategy to address the root causes. Our entire system is designed to “react” to situations versus proactively “fix” the systemic issues. Unless we take a step back and figure out how to spend the “pot of tax dollars” in a more efficient and effective way, without buying a bigger pot, costs will continue to spiral out of control. Thankfully we do have a lot of agencies that are doing great work, but they work in isolation of each other and are often unable to harness the collective power of working together. We also have pockets of innovation in our system, and there is serious need to continue to replicate those models of success. Then perhaps we can stop the obsession of just creating and implementing an over-abundance of “policies” that are designed to deal with a few of the absolute worst offenders.

Under the Microscope - Examining 'Probiotic' Workplace Cultures

Many smart organizations are trying to build better workplaces for their people. They get the value of doing things right and even band-aid solutions or antibiotics are better than doing nothing at all. - Consider that mega-company Coca Cola recently reported it was implementing a “mindfulness” stress relief program.¹ It doesn't change the root of the stress, but it does provide temporary relief. Walmart announced that it decided it was going to change the piped in store music² - to boost employee morale?! Not sure how that's working out for them. Workplace Ombudsman roles are starting to sprout up like the first crop of garlic in a garden. All of these ideas are implemented to react to the symptoms of illness in the workplace, not make them healthier workplaces in a sustainable way.

Focusing on “doing the right things for the right reasons,” and educating and enlightening people on how and why decisions are made are the first streams to truly transforming work and workplaces. Human transformation and business transformation are both equally difficult to achieve, but are remarkably inter-related. If you improve business processes and management capacity that will transform the work environment, the vast majority of people will respond and adapt remarkably well.

If we examine “probiotic” or healthy workplace cultures you will consistently find:

- Organizational values that are lived and felt by people, not conflicted and complicated words on a page;
- Leadership and personal values are consistently aligned to support actions and behaviours in a manner consistent with the organizational values – no exceptions;
- A few bad eggs are singled out and shipped off to another more suitable egg carton;
- Jobs and roles are built around peoples' strengths, versus trying to cram unique people into standardized job boxes;
- Cost effective decisions are made by carefully evaluating all short and long term operational costs to maximize benefits for people and the organization;
- Organizational structures are designed to be fluid to leverage the talents of many, versus a select few;
- People are given accountability and held to it;
- And people are inspired to contribute and feel their ideas and contributions are recognized, rewarded and more importantly make a difference in building capacity in their organizations.

Under the Microscope – The Micro View

Our major cities all boast shining, gleaming office towers and sometimes these can be the perfect deceptive container to hide a toxic germ-infested workplace. Social media is enabling the deceptive

¹ Dobson, S. (2015, July 13). Taking mindfulness online. *Canadian HR Reporter*.

² Thanks Boss! Wal-Mart Warms Stores, Allows Jeans, Nixes Celine Dion | NBC News. (2014, June 4). Retrieved October 8, 2015, from <http://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/thanks-boss-walmart-warms-stores-nixes-celine-dion-allows-jeans-n369671>.

onion layers to be peeled away and often expose unhealthy workplaces. Little by little the sparkle of these pristine towers is scratched away by social and public media, and what is revealed is often a nasty surprise or an embarrassing situation.

Assessing the culture of internal work environments can be a misleading adventure if you don't have the right incubator. If the culture does not support open and honest feedback, results will typically not reflect the views and opinions of employees and thus commences the great divide between what the executive team believes and what the underlying current of employee perceptions actually are. Knowingly or unknowingly being blindsided by bad PR due to toxic workplaces is a serious business risk and one thing is for sure, it's not that easy to hide it in the corporate closet or company cellar anymore.

In order to gauge an accurate measurement, organizations should first examine realistically what their top HR challenges are and then examine how those are allowed to occur.

Start by answering these questions:

- What are the top 10 HR management issues for your company?
- What are the top 10 complaints from employees?
- To what extent do you feel your managers have the right skills to *lead the people* in your organization based on your organizational values?
- To what extent do you feel your managers have the right skills to *lead your business* based on your goals and objectives?
- How would you describe what you typically observe in your work environment?
 - Active team discussion, problem-solving energy and laughter, or,
 - Heads down / silence, or,
 - Negative comments / complaints / arguments.

Generally an active, loud and laughter-filled workplace is reflective of "healthy" high-performing organizations. The heads-down approach generally gets a company by, while the "ill" and underperforming workplaces are generally known for negative behaviours, frustrations and arguments.

To examine organization health, answer the following:

1. If you were invisible at the "water-cooler," would you be disappointed by what people are saying about your organization and leadership?
2. Do you know why people stay in your organization?
3. Are people afraid of making mistakes?
4. Do employees have direct access to approach senior leaders to discuss issues with them?
5. Is more time spent on fighting fires or on strategic actions?
6. What would the spouses/partners or family members of your employees say about your company?

Building Roadmaps to Sustainable Futures

To build roadmaps to sustainable futures:

- Identify the major trends
- Dissect the underlying issues
- Quantify costs
- Create trustworthy avenues to obtain more specific information from employees
- Summarize the current state (no finger pointing)
- Create a vision for the desired future state
- Recognize the gap
- Map out any roadblocks
- Create opportunities to leverage existing strengths

Under the Microscope – The Impact on Talent Retention and HR Programs

Sometimes we use convenient or conventional type excuses to mask the underlying currents that are hidden in workplaces. General trends in demographics are quickly assimilated with emerging themes in workplaces. The key is to understand how to correctly evaluate the deep underlying organizational currents in order to create more sustainable and healthier cultures.

Lack of Talent

We often hear organizations saying there is a lack of talent in the marketplace and this is the rationale for why they can't attract qualified talent. While there is a global shortage of certain skills, the reality is that only the top innovative workplaces can attract and retain top talent.

Recruitment Overdrive

HR practitioners in some industries are reporting that they are just hiring machines, meaning that people are leaving faster than they can be recruited into the organization. Poor work environments are most often the culprit and people will literally run for their lives before they get sucked into the vortex of organizational dysfunction.

Worker Dissatisfaction

It has been reported that half of Canadians hate their jobs.³ Disengagement, poor management, misalignment of skills and under-utilization of talent are key contributors. Presenteeism is becoming a greater risk for companies than absenteeism. At least when people are absent, you know they aren't working but a seemingly busy bum in a seat doesn't equate to productivity or results.

Lack of Development

Organizations will often fail to protect their most significant investments in their people by not

³ Nelson, J. (2011, June 22). Half of Canadians hate their jobs, so why aren't they prepared for job interviews? - Canadian Business. Retrieved October 8, 2015, from <http://www.canadianbusiness.com/blogs-and-comment/half-of-canadians-hate-their-jobs-so-why-arent-they-prepared-for-job-interviews/>.

paying attention to, or supporting learning and development. Commitment to skill and knowledge development is one of the top factors that attract and keep people engaged in organizations. Hiring for potential and training-up are cost effective strategies to build capacity in organizations.

Jerk Factor

Present in almost every organization, the plague of the jerk factor is a serious risk to organizational performance. My conservative estimate is that for every “jerk” we continue to employ in our organizations, it costs \$175,000 annually in lost productivity time. Easy math if you quickly count them up and run the formula out.

Under the Microscope – Macro Stall of the Feeder Systems

Organizations do not work in isolation; they are acutely connected to the social, economic and political domes that they operate in. We speak of a desire for realizing the age of innovation and creativity as the key to the growth of our economies, but we are saddled with ancient industrial age systems that focus on administrative churn. These outdated systems are the main pipeline or feeders to our organizational systems. So it’s not entirely the fault of bad organizations, but bad governance and oversight.

Organizations, people and government agencies spend inordinate amounts of valuable and limited quantities of time, energy and resources chasing non-value added administration. The system is dictating that we focus on all the wrong things, for all the wrong reasons. Consequently it is our systems that are broken, not our people who in large part are trying to survive in the working world and are trying to improve things. We are all trying to do something, but we aren’t working together to achieve a strong national or even provincial vision and strategy.

The Macro View

It’s no wonder that Canadians are generally apathetic and passive. “Fixing” the system is an insurmountable and monumental task. Fixing it has to start somewhere and if we all start a collaborative dialogue to inspire our governments to serve its citizens (not citizens serving politicians as appears to be the case) then we can start to create new and innovative pilot systems to demonstrate how things can be done bigger and better, and generate more success for all stakeholders. All of us need to start a new tsunami wave to work collaboratively to create environments that support new generations of action-oriented problem solvers, and create environments that allow people of all ages to use their brains for what they were engineered to do – imagining, thinking, and believing.

About the Author



Diana (Diane) Wiesenthal, FCHRP created and leads a company called Corporate People Responsibility® Ltd. (CPRinc). Previously she was a member of the executive for the Canadian Wheat Board as Vice President, People & Organizational Services. She is a past President of NAHRMA, CCHRA, and HRMAM. Based on her international leadership experience, Diana was selected by the United States, People to People Ambassadors organization to lead senior international HR delegations to various parts of the world. Her academic training in HR management was completed at Queen's University (executive program), the University of Manitoba and Red River College. She obtained her professional human resource designation, CHRP, in 1993, and was awarded the Fellow designation in 2012.

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