



PERFORMANCE HAPPENS IN A HEALTHY WORKPLACE

ABSTRACT

This paper sets out a way to think about healthy workplaces, working from a position that a healthy workplace is a prerequisite for sustained effective performance. The ideas may help leaders identify and remove workplace performance barriers and establish the conditions in which this becomes possible.

Following from some definitions relating to a healthy workplace, the approach focuses on three linked sets of activities that managers and supervisors can use to create a workplace where performance occurs; first, creating and/or sustaining a positive holding environment that becomes the workplace; then, shaping it so that it supports good performance, and; third, acting effectively within the workplace to remove performance barriers and keep it positive and effective. Each set proposes some activities and guidelines. They are intended for use well before the need for more formal decisions such as reorganizations or remedial actions like personnel transfers becomes necessary. Applied effectively, they may diminish a need later to use these more powerful tools or lessen their collateral impact.

An attached questionnaire may provide useful information about employee opinions on the current state of their workplace.

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PERFORMANCE HAPPENS IN HEALTHY WORKPLACES

Performance occurs in workplaces; social spaces where the collective accomplishments of individuals contribute to unit or team objectives and enable progress toward larger goals. Human Performance Technology (HPT) is a process used to find and remove performance barriers within this space so that accomplishments and contributions are aligned, effective, and timely.

The quality of the workplace surely influences performance; good workplaces create a space where excellence can flourish and high performance becomes the way to do business. We all have a vested interest in creating and sustaining such a place. Here are some ideas about creating one, written as suggestions to managers and supervisors interested in better performance. HPT Practitioners may also find the ideas helpful in defining and locating performance barriers.

Why is this important?

Quite apart from a moral imperative, and accepting the positive obligation in various organizational policies backed by legislation, it makes simple sense to create a workplace where people can do their best. We all come to work to do a good job, so why not make the place where we work the best it can be? It's an all-hands obligation.

Thomas Davenport develops a human capital rationale by working with the idea that employees make daily decisions to invest some part of their talents in productive work¹. The investment decision is one result of a psychological contract -the deal-between an individual employee and an organization. The deal is influenced to a great extent by the social context in which the investment decision is made; the workplace. Understanding the deal and its workplace context, and seeing how each influences an employee's investment decision, provides new ways to look at performance barriers

Healthy workplaces support and enable healthy deals; they enable employee decisions to invest more talent and energy. Simply put, in a workplace where people are satisfied they are more engaged in their job and more committed to the organization². They are more productive and more open to new ideas because they feel secure in the place where they work and are comfortable in their work relationships.

As a leader, creating and sustaining the conditions that enable employees to fully invest their talents is in your self-interest, because the resources you are responsible for will be better able to create the results you are accountable for.

A General Approach

I define a healthy workplace as a social structure where leadership, work practices, shared values, and behaviours create four conditions; i) a sustained high level of employee satisfaction; ii) a high level of engagement in the employee's job; iii) a sustained high level of commitment to broader organizational objectives, and; iv) an enduring affinity for the organization's role. When these conditions are optimized a healthy workplace exists³.

So, how would you go about creating a place where these conditions exist? I propose action at three levels. Each is related and one gives rise to another. You could also use these to evaluate the quality of a given workplace using the assessment tool at [Annex A](#).

The first thing you can do is create and/or sustain a positive holding environment—establishing the framework and scaffolding of a structured social space where a group of people have shared experiences about work and working together. Second, you can shape the holding environment so that it becomes a place where people can accomplish objectives and work together effectively. Third, you can act effectively as a leader within the workplace to identify and deal with specific issues - the performance barriers - which prevent it from being as good as it can be.

Before going further, the point is made that these actions should happen well in advance of more formal mechanisms such as, say, Alternate Dispute Resolution (ADR) or decisions to reorganize or transfer personnel. If you can get the basics right early on and remove the barriers, it may diminish the need later to use these relatively blunt instruments to resolve complex human problems.

I will take each level in sequence and expand on it.

Establishing and/or Sustaining a Holding Environment

A positive holding environment is a supportive and structured social space where a group of people can accomplish something together. Leaders are primarily responsible for establishing and/or sustaining it⁴. You accomplish this by providing and reinforcing the structures that define and enable it.

Healthy workplaces have some basic elements in place: boundaries, structure, a routine or rhythm, and formal and informal social rules about behaviours that are evident and functioning well at an appropriate level. All of these variables help create a holding environment. The real challenge is to find 'normal'—a reasonable balance for any one of them, the right combination of all four, and the ability to adjust them as circumstances suggest.

Creating and Defining Clear Boundaries: a good holding environment has clear social boundaries or borders: you know where “inside” ends and “outside” begins. The demarcation creates a sense of shared space and identity.

Establishing a Reasonable Structure: Within the boundaries there is social form consisting of vertical and horizontal structures based on differentiated tasks, roles, and relationships. Together, these help establish the stable social environment needed to do jobs and tasks that create accomplishments.

Maintaining a Routine: Boundaries and structure provide a place where a stable routine can develop. There is a tempo and pace in a healthy workplace that provides a rhythm that is consistent, promotes stability, and yet gives enough variety to keep life interesting.

Advocating & Maintaining Rules of Behaviour: There are positive social rules in healthy workplaces that help everyone to understand the comfort zone for discourse, behaviours, and relationships. Formal rules include position descriptions and organization charts as well as policies about workplace harassment and redress. As important, there are also largely unspoken but powerful conventions about how to be OK in that workplace, especially in regards to communication, conflict, and rewards.

Among the many other things you do as a leader, one is to establish and maintain the integrity of these basic structures. You do this so that there is positive social order and appropriate stability in the place where employees spend a good part of their lives. When this happens, employees are in a better position to make a decision to fully invest their talents in productive work.

Workplace & Culture

Beyond creating and sustaining a holding environment, the actions you can take to create a healthy workplace occur at two levels: actions that further shape the holding environment and then interactions with others within it. Since both influence the workplace culture, we need to look at what culture is.

Culture is what it is—sometimes it's good, and sometimes it reflects a workplace where, for whatever reason, people have organized things to their own particular liking, thank you very much, with obvious results for the communities and clients who expect to be served. Either way, it's important to know about culture so you can exert some influence on it.

Defining the Culture

First, a definition of workplace culture. It's the set of persistent patterns of behaviours that a group of people who work together have evolved over time to deal with two specific questions: How do we do the work? And how do we work together⁵? These questions are asked and answered many times every day at work. The process of enquiry and response does a lot to shape how people see the place where they work.

Culture is not monolithic. The first question is about how to do the core business at the place where work gets done: on an acute care ward, providing port security, doing commercial crime investigations, or providing intelligence analyses. It's very local and specific to a unit, team, or watch. The second relates to how people co-exist in that workplace: how they relate to each other, how they communicate, have conflicts, etc. It is also very local.

Culture forms when successful answers to these two questions have been shown to work over a period of time *in that place*. So, culture forms locally, gradually and with many trials and errors and the process can be a long transit. But, different groups also come together at different levels and in different ways in any organization, so these questions and their answers also exist in different places, and so does culture. It's like a mosaic seen through a kaleidoscope; the same colours, in many different patterns, changing frequently.

Culture in the Workplace

The first question is about the accepted practices that everyone uses to do day-to-day work. If Police Constable Smith is known as the go-to person for search warrants because she has a track record of success in writing them, then the accepted cultural practice in that unit is that you go to Constable Smith to get a search warrant written or at least OK'd. This belief has a major influence on how work gets done; if Constable Smith is not available then the warrant may not get written or may be delayed, with obvious results.

Similarly, the second question deals with accepted beliefs about how to communicate, how to reward, and how to manage conflict, among other things that shape the nature of the workplace. These beliefs are usually established early in a unit's life, are passed on as informal guidance to new employees, and so extend into the present as "how we do things around here." If Ms Jones and Mr. Smith have a conflict, it may never be addressed openly because there is an accepted belief that interpersonal conflict is best handled through indirect communication.

Leadership and Culture

As a leader, you obviously want to know as much as possible about the culture where you work. You get at it through the two questions. But remember, this is a tricky area. The sequence matters. People bring varying degrees of expertise and ability to this and, unless you are a cracker-jack facilitator with impressive analytical skills, it is probably easiest to start to understand the culture from the work question and, once you have some traction and credibility, begin to work gradually on understanding the one about working together.

Guidelines for Shaping Healthy Workplaces

There are some powerful leadership practices you can use to further define the workplace so it supports performance and becomes a place where people can accomplish objectives and work together effectively. Most of us would call this a healthy workplace: a place where people make personal decisions to perform at a high level because they feel good about the work, good about working together, are secure about the place where they work, and feel an affinity with the organization's overarching role⁶. As a leader, you have, or should have, considerable ability to apply these practices or at least reduce their impact so they don't become performance barriers. As you apply them, what you aim to do is attenuate some workplace stressors and begin to work toward a condition where stress is moderated.

Ensure Consistency

Managers make decisions about many of the things that create rhythm, tempo, and pace in work life. By setting priorities, workload, and scheduling, you play a large role in setting the 'beat' at work that helps to determine what we think of as "normal." For example, setting the frequency with which a management team meets can have a substantial influence on the rhythm of life at work.

Most of us like a consistent beat or pace to life that creates a comfortable rhythm within which we can do our work at a satisfying tempo: one that's neither too slow nor too fast. Getting the rhythm right is important. To the extent that you can, and everyone recognizes that things will appear out of left field that make this a challenge, try and set a consistent tempo or pace to work. It will take some time to understand what "normal" is and decide if this is appropriate, so don't make quick judgments about routine.

Reduce Uncertainty

One big thing you can do to reduce stress and create a healthy workplace is to manage the level of uncertainty in it. In the absence of reliable information, uncertainty is present—a thing can go this way, or it can go that way—and much of the time nobody really knows which way it will go. The result is that a good part of each employee's day is spent trying to reduce this uncertainty to an acceptable level, which is one way to make certain that the angst we all feel about not knowing about things that will influence us is at least tolerable. This happens through speculation, gossip, and a range of other social behaviours that take time, divert attention, and diminish performance.

Leaders have access to information that others do not. This information can greatly influence the perceived level of uncertainty at work. This is information about the future, or perhaps the present, that is important to employees because it may affect them, or they believe it may affect them, particularly about work priorities (which work should I do?) and about things like, say, promotions or reorganizations (who will I be working with?)

This is all about managing "the loop" in the workplace: who is in the know and who is not. Because of their role, leaders are central to at least the formal "loop," and ought to be central to informal loops. Managing the size (how many people) and composition (which people) of the loop is important because they create the ins and outs in the workplace. If you don't do this well it can lead to exclusion, then isolation, and then loss of commitment, all of which diminish performance.

Minimize Ambiguity

Related to uncertainty but a bit different, ambiguity arises when people are confused about the meaning of something; a thing can mean this, or it can mean that. Sometimes this can be trivial, but sometimes it can be very important, particularly about work or relationships. Ambiguity is a workplace stressor. If nobody is available to clarify the meaning about the thing, people feel powerless and anxious about what to do. Performance lapses while everyone fusses about what it means.

To the extent that you can, reduce ambiguity about the two big questions: work and working together. If people are unsure about what the boss wants them to do, or how they will be received by others if they admit to not knowing what to do, they may do the wrong thing, they may freelance, or they may not do anything. Either way, there is a good chance they won't be doing enough of what they should be doing because they don't know what is expected of them.

Unclear expectations introduce ambiguity. As a leader, you deal with it by being clear about what you expect in terms of operations, behaviours, and comportment at work. Set expectations by telling employees what result you want, but let them work out the details of how to get it. Be specific about ends but flexible about means.

Respect Ritual and Ceremony

Even the smallest workplaces have recurring events that mark the work day: someone always goes for coffee at a certain hour, and meal breaks are always an occasion for people to gather and talk about life. These are important ways that people affirm the patterns that shape their lives.

Positive rituals do important things to promote healthy workplaces. They confirm and strengthen our connections to each other and to the things that we do together⁷. They help sustain and affirm the holding environment. But rituals can also be negative; they can be used to exclude or to isolate people, and can be used to minimize the importance of some things that are actually quite critical—for example, the need for respect, tolerance, and diversity in the workplace.

Ceremony is related to ritual but occurs less frequently. They are the ways that people mark significant passages in their lives; a retirement, a birthday, a transfer, or the end of a major project are all occasions when people gather and mark transitions in the workplace. Because they tend to happen less often and so are more visible than rituals, they are excellent opportunities for you to observe the culture doing one of its important functions: signaling and marking a change in the way the two questions are answered. Watch the event carefully. You may see some important roles played out and get a sense of who exercises influence within the workplace.

Be Inclusive

Workplaces are healthier and performance improves when employees have a say in what they do and how they work together. The level of a person's engagement in the job and commitment to the work tends to be directly related to the degree to which he or she feels ownership of the work and the process by which the work was decided on⁸.

By participating in how priorities are set, and in talking about what needs to be done to move toward them, employees will understand expectations and have a greater sense of ownership over realistic goals that are worth striving for, because they know what they have to do to achieve them. In doing this, you can get a 'two-fer' because including employees also reduces uncertainty and ambiguity.

Leadership Practices for Healthy Workplaces

Leaders act within the holding environment called the workplace to get things done. How they act matters a lot. Here are eight practical and tactical things you can do as a leader, developed from work by Kerry Bunker and Michael Whitfield⁹.

Meet People Where They Are

As a leader, when you first encounter people over whom you exercise authority, there's always a subtle expectation that the group first recognize your role and place in the food chain. It's natural; people in charge expect to be respected and to have some level of recognition of this reflected in their dealings with others. In a way, this sets an expectation and requires the group to come to you.

The practical effect of this expectation is that it sets up a situation in which the group has to subordinate or even set aside its own reality to enter yours, however temporarily. And the group's collective reality is the reality of the workplace. To create a healthy workplace, you have to know what the current reality is, so it's important that you meet people where they are, by entering their reality and adopting it as your own.

Identify the Stress and Coping Issues

As you step into the workplace, be alert to stress and coping issues. These are the real day to day performance barriers. Every workplace has them, some will be more evident than others, and chances are they are complex, dynamic, and people-related. Good places to find them would be in the areas of relationships, resources, responsibilities, workload, and priorities. Ask employees - they won't hesitate to say!

Stress issues develop from stressors such as a poor holding environment, a too-fast pace, and/or high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity about work and working together. Coping issues develop when people are unable to deal directly with stressors and create a social "work around" that allows them to get on with life with a minimum of pain by working around a condition, a particular conflict, or a set of old assumptions that are no longer valid but persist because "we've always done it that way."

Stress and coping issues constrain the workplace from being as healthy as it needs to be. They are performance barriers. Finding the root causes is important. A good place to start would be in the shape and character of the holding environment. The big ones are of significant concern to you and attending to them can give you real traction in your role. They should be a big part of your personal leadership agenda.

Legitimize Feelings

This is the practical application of the skill of empathy. Being emphatic means acknowledging and making it OK for an employee to feel the way he or she feels in relation to the stress and coping issues and to confirm that he or she does not have to, within reason, set aside his or her feelings about the issues because of your role or position.

It is probable that the stress and coping issues have some history. People experience change and undertake transition very differently. What was an easy adjustment for one employee may be a heart-wrenching loss for another. Feelings one way ought not to diminish the feelings of another in a different way. You need to make it OK for

people to feel the way they do. If you can do this successfully, then you've got another beginning of confidence, and that can lead to trust.

Deal with Issues Authentically

The next step from empathy is to respond to the stress and coping issues authentically. If you do the first three items on this list well, you'll have engaged with employees on their terms, worked to identify their issues, and done this in a way that is empathetic. Given this, the group will likely have developed some confidence in you and will be watching carefully to see if you are going to play in the deep end (authentically) or the shallow end (not authentically) of the social situations that exist around the stress and coping issues.

This means dealing with the root causes of these issues in an open and transparent way. People who work together in complex environments have finely calibrated BS radar. They see behaviours clearly, will impute motives freely, and will know what they see in terms of authenticity. The messages that you send through your verbal and non-verbal behaviours about these issues, and indeed any issue, will be carefully evaluated.

Dealing with issues authentically means making informed choices about becoming engaged, accepting the context and acknowledging the players, searching for root causes openly and being motivated to find a solution that works for everyone, steadfastly refusing to pick winners and losers, and engaging the whole workplace in the search for a reasonable and practical solution that will remove or reduce the issue that has become a performance barrier. This pretty much commits you to a complex and time-consuming process. But given the importance of the issues to having a healthy workplace—and they would not be issues if they were not important—you really have no choice but to approach them this way.

You can, of course, decide to blow off these issues by using minimizing language or excluding metaphors, or grudgingly acknowledging them and then sitting on your hands. This does everyone a disservice. As a leader, you have a role to play in these issues that nobody else can play, and you need to play it well. If you blow the issue off, then there is a very good possibility you'll be blown off by the culture. Your life will become that much more complicated as you try to recover your credibility but now in the face of well-founded skepticism about your authenticity. In turn, this diminishes your legitimacy. And without credibility and legitimacy as a leader, you may as well go home.

Speak from the Head and the Heart

Stress and coping issues will influence you as a human being as well as someone with a formal role. Speak about them from your emotional side and your intellectual side. It reinforces your authenticity and puts you in a position where you can see more than one side of an issue and its possible solution.

Speaking from the heart is about personal empathy: being OK with the way you feel about something and not fussing about how you appear to others. The "iron mask of command" has limited use over the longer term, and if you plan to be in that

workplace for a while, it is good that you show all of the sides of your personality so that your full self is visible and people have something to support other than an opaque or one-dimensional presence.

Model New Behaviour and Values

As you speak from the head and the heart, you begin to model new behaviours and values. You do this by personally and consistently demonstrating, in thought, word, and action, the new values and behaviours that you expect to see in the workplace.

Here is where you start subtly changing the tone and character of the workplace, and so begin to address the stress and coping issues. People look at leaders for meaning and guidance. Through your presence, and by personally modeling new behaviours, you will slowly begin to shape a workplace where there is no uncertainty about how to do the work and how to work together; where expectations for work and behaviour are clearly established, understood, and held to; where positive rituals and credible ceremonies reinforce a healthy sense of collective identity; and where employees feel themselves to be safe and their opinions valued.

It does not take much to begin; simple active listening and active speaking will do for a start. You can move on from there to work on how you explain or interpret events. This approach also does not require large changes in how you are as a person; these are not large swings in style but rather subtle changes in comportment and sentiment toward others.

Help People Learn How to Learn

One of the big levers you employ as a manager is the ability to shine a light on the performance barriers: the stress and coping issues. Because of the role you play, you can 'hang a lantern on the problem' and direct attention to those things that cause social strain in the workplace¹⁰; in doing this, you can require that people begin to address the root causes.

You may discover a situation that becomes what is called 'a teachable moment,' a situation you can use to help employees learn new behaviours and learn how they learned that a new behaviour or value was needed to remove the root cause. The first—learning new behaviours—may be a solution to the stress and coping issues. The second—learning to learn how they knew that a new behaviour was needed—is the key to future success because it equips employees to solve their own problems by themselves and prevent a recurrence of the issue.

Conclusions: Never Say It's Over

Healthy workplaces do not sustain themselves without ongoing effort and care. The need to monitor the holding environment and maintain to its form never ends. It can't. For as long as there is an organization full of people, there will be ebbs and flows to work and human behaviours that require your presence and, on occasion, your small attentions that may diminish the need for larger interventions later. Only leaders acting effectively in the workplace can make these judgments. So you need,

above all else, to remain present, ready, willing, and able to make the workplace better. If you can sustain workplace satisfaction, help people to feel more engaged in their jobs, and more strongly committed to their organization, you'll be on the way to creating the kind of workplace where performance happens.

Annex A: HEALTHY WORKPLACE ASSESSMENT TOOL

The following statements are intended to elicit opinions about the quality of your workplace. Indicate the role you play in the workplace by circling the phrase that describes your role. Next, respond to the statements by indicating the extent to which you agree with it, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 3 (Neither Agree or Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

I am a Manager in this workplace	I am a Supervisor in this workplace	I am an individual contributor in this workplace			
Statement About the Place Where You Work	I totally disagree with this	I sort of disagree with this	I'm Neutral on this	I sort of agree with this	I fully agree with this
There are clear boundaries where I work. I can tell who is a part of the workplace and who is not.	1	2	3	4	5
There is enough structure in the workplace. I know what I have to do, who I work for, and who I work with.	1	2	3	4	5
The work routine has a tempo that is comfortable for me. There is a reasonable pace at work.	1	2	3	4	5
There are accepted rules for behaviour in the workplace and most people comply with them.	1	2	3	4	5
Most decisions at work are consistent and help to reinforce the tempo or pace of life in the workplace.	1	2	3	4	5
I'm not uncertain about things at work. I generally feel that I'm kept "in the loop" on things that affect me.	1	2	3	4	5
When something happens at work I usually have a good understanding of what it means for me.	1	2	3	4	5
We share small rituals at work and these help me connect to others and feel part of a larger group.	1	2	3	4	5
We usually mark events like birthdays and retirements with a celebration and this helps me to feel connected to others at work.	1	2	3	4	5
I feel included in events and decisions about work, scheduling, and priorities. What I have to say is mostly listened to.	1	2	3	4	5
The leadership at work is part of the workplace. They are part of us and I feel connect to them.	1	2	3	4	5
The leadership where I work has correctly identified the stress and coping issues present in the workplace.	1	2	3	4	5
The way I feel about these issues is listened to, respected, and accepted as a legitimate response to the issues.	1	2	3	4	5

The leadership at work is sincerely interested in dealing with the stress and coping issues in the workplace.	1	2	3	4	5
The issues are mostly about relationships	1	2	3	4	5
The issues are mostly about resources.	1	2	3	4	5
The issues are mostly about workload.	1	2	3	4	5
The issues are mostly about work priorities.	1	2	3	4	5
Leadership has responded to the issues in a way that helps me to see them as human beings.	1	2	3	4	5
Leadership at work demonstrates the new values and behaviours that will address the stress and coping issues.	1	2	3	4	5
Leadership at work helps me to understand what my part is in addressing the stress and coping issues.	1	2	3	4	5
Leadership at work helps me to understand what I need to change in order to be more effective at work.	1	2	3	4	5
Leadership always tries to improve the workplace. Most of their actions take the workplace into account.	1	2	3	4	5
Overall, I'm pretty satisfied with the work environment	1	2	3	4	5
Overall, I'm feeling engaged in my job at work.	1	2	3	4	5
Overall, I'm feeling committed to the organization.	1	2	3	4	5

ENDNOTES

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⁵ James Q. Wilson, "*Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It*" Basic Books, (1989), Chapter 6, pp 91.

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⁷ Albrecht, Karl, "*Social Intelligence*" Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, California (1999) pp 203 – 207.

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⁹ Kerry A Bunker and Michael Whitfield, *Leading with Authenticity in Times of Transition*, Centre for Creative Leadership (2005), Greensboro, North Carolina.

¹⁰ Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers*, Belknap, Harvard University (1994), Pages xi and 26.