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Quality and healthy workplaces: HR must play a critical role

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Enlightened organizations know that fostering a quality and healthy workplace environment helps to retain the brightest and the best employees, creates a culture that ensures success and helps improve productivity and employee health. In such an environment, employees actually like coming to work.

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As John Perry, senior advisor at the National Quality Institute said, organizations that strive for excellence through quality are those that apply new knowledge to work. They set a clear direction, establish plans for improvement and gain knowledge from the people they serve.

They know improving quality is not about changing people. It's about improving the system the people work in, with their help. They realize slogans and technological improvements can never displace the requirement to treat everyone with respect and dignity.

HR professionals can be instrumental in implementing the environment needed to sustain quality and employee wellness over the long term. That's because the quest for excellence has to focus on both quality and wellness. Without both, an organization will not achieve the level of quality needed to sustain good results over time.

The role of HR can include communicating the business case for quality to other senior team members in order to gain support across the entire organization. HR can be instrumental in achieving the culture change required in reaching high levels of excellence — changing to a culture that cares about employees, clients and suppliers,

determines their needs and involves them in the organization's continuous improvement planning. Being an excellent organization involves implementing a broad range of programs and delivering them within a strategic business framework as part of the overall business plan.

Elements for success

Here are some of the elements for success:

•**Leadership involvement:** Organizations need to ask what their leaders are doing to show support for employees and the implementation of quality processes needed to run a smooth operation. Is there a well-understood strategic direction and mission? Is there an open door policy that fosters communication and feedback? HR can be instrumental in getting the senior team involved. HR can help obtain buy-in on the idea of adopting a quality framework. Without senior team involvement, not everyone will support programs implemented and having everyone understand the direction and the goals is a key element for success.

Take Calian Technologies, an Ottawa-headquartered technology firm, as an example. Calian Technologies embarked on a formal quality program after the technology sector downturn a few years ago. The company involved staff at all levels in the planning, even in the very earliest stages of development. In order to ensure long-term success, the HR director was responsible for the "people focus" element of the business framework. Once an assessment had been done, opportunities were identified and a method was established for improving the business operations. Working in conjunction with her was the IT director responsible for process improvement and the general manager responsible for driving the whole program and steering the leadership process. The senior team shared accountability for success.

•**Assessment and planning:**

It's important to assess the organization's current state and identify the challenges that are inhibiting outstanding results. Assessment is key to improving an organization's performance. This should involve employees across the organization and will help identify key issues that should be addressed in the business planning cycle. HR's role should be to ensure key personnel are trained on how to conduct an assessment.

•**A focus on people:**

HR takes the lead with this part of a quality program. The HR plan needs to outline key components for success. This would include many different elements including job descriptions, regular performance reviews, training, rewards and recognition, the various employee benefits and all of the many policies that pertain to staff and their health and wellbeing. It's important to ask employees about their perceptions of management and about employees' needs, and determine their levels of satisfaction. This should be done every 12 to 18 months and can be done by survey and focus groups. Communication and feedback of the survey results and resulting action plan are necessary in order to make employees feel informed of the improvement process, and aware that their suggestions are heard and acted upon.

•**Process management and training:**

HR departments are often the custodian of professional development activities and

planning, and the quality department will likely be responsible for leading process management initiatives. Training is a key component in a quality environment. For instance, learning the techniques on how to define and improve processes will go a long way in clarifying roles and responsibilities that go hand-in-hand with current position descriptions and professional development plans. Processes that are flawed or cumbersome create more work, errors and disgruntled clients and employees and result in a direct hit to the bottom line.

A good example of this is Toronto-based American Express Canada. They trained all staff and armed them with basic quality tools. The “Quest for Quality” training program helped staff understand what quality was all about so everyone could relate to the company’s goals and objectives for a quality environment. It also enabled and empowered them to contribute directly to quality improvement. This was a very extensive initiative and continues to be offered to all new staff each year. In all well-performing companies, cross-functional employee teams work on improving and documenting processes and are empowered to implement changes as required to ensure the organization maintains its culture of continuous improvement.

•Going beyond health and safety legislation:

Physical environment and health and safety compliance are key to a quality organization. An organization must go beyond minimum standards. This will foster and support a safe and healthy work environment and create win-win relationships with employees and stakeholders. HR needs to ensure the methodology is in place to ensure compliance with legislation, but also to involve staff in developing systems and procedures that go beyond just basic requirements. Involving employees in the improvement process helps build trust, foster loyalty and improve morale.

•Health and lifestyle practices:

Programs such as employee assistance programs, smoking cessation, healthy eating, health risk identification and assessment of employees’ satisfaction levels are just a few examples of the programs needed to support a healthy environment. The leaders at Windsor, Ont.- based DaimlerChrysler and the Canadian Auto Workers know implementing healthy programs has resulted in improved employee morale, higher employee satisfaction and a good place to work. One of the key elements is involving staff in designing the right kinds of programs for them.

•Supportive culture:

Poor mental health is one of the leading causes of illness. One in five employees is affected. According to studies by the Mensante Corporation, a Toronto-based workplace mental health consultancy, only one in eight workers will receive effective intervention for their mental health issues and 25 out of 1,000 will go on long-term disability because of them. HR managers need to ensure there are mechanisms in place to adequately detect mental illness and provide support for these employees with a goal to lower these rising statistics.

HR needs to create well-defined policies to support initiatives so all employees will have

equal advantage and not be treated differently by different managers. Creating a culture of work-life balance for employees is largely the responsibility of the HR department. Calian Technologies has established family days for staff to tend to children and parent needs, over and above the regular sick days allotted each year. This is well defined in a policy that was developed with staff's input. Other initiatives could include flexible work hours, job sharing, telework, workload issues, leaves and education.

•A focus on clients and suppliers:

Organizations that ask clients and suppliers about their own performance and subsequently act on the feedback will be well ahead of the competition. This will help foster great client relationships as well as producing better products and services. Relationship building works as well for internal clients and stakeholders. HR should ask internal clients to rate them. Use of surveys and focus groups will help determine whether there are areas where service could be improved.

•Measuring outcomes:

The key to all of these examples is the measurement of effectiveness. Organizations need a methodology to determine whether programs are effective and are meeting the needs of the organization and its stakeholders. There are a number of things to measure under each of the sections noted above. Key performance measures need to be identified and tracked over time to assess the effectiveness of quality programs.

Becoming a quality organization takes four to five years and involves a very comprehensive set of measures and stakeholders across the entire organization. It's important to note that without the involvement of all stakeholders, an organization will not reach its potential. There are a number of things HR can do, however, to kick-start and support a quality journey.

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