

The ReDEFINING of A HEALTHY PLACE TO WORK

by Rex P. Gatto, Ph.D.

We, as an American culture, have recently experienced profound changes due not only to 9/11 but also to the very public exposure of corporate fraud and greed.

These events have had an acute impact in the workplace. This summer Emily Stevick and I spoke to the Department of Energy discussing resilience in the workplace. Previous to the above occurrences who would have thought that such a topic as resilience would be a workplace point of interest.

The workplace we now have has had drastic and devastating changes in short periods of time without even allowing us much time to even think about resilience. We find that people in the workplace are now off balance, waiting and wondering when the next act of terror or corporate fraud is going to occur. This ever present tensions constantly bubbling below the surface has changed our worldview, our day-to-day places of work, and our own individual identities.

Given all of the above, it is obvious that these changes can interject into how psychologists look at their clients. We, as mental health professionals would do well to know what is going on in the workplace to better understand and to help clients be resilient in meeting these new challenges.

Change, uncertainty, and insecurity cause both employees and employers to second-guess themselves in that most of what they have been prepared to do via careers may no longer be valid. These changes give you, as a psychologist, the opportunity to reexamine your skills and discuss what you can offer people struggling in the workplace. What skills do people in today's workplace need to be successful?

For the people in the workplace to be resilient, they need to work for an organization that has created a vision, established leadership and followership, generated quality products and services, built a competitive base and continues to succeed. In order to demonstrate these essential skills, they also need to effectively communicate, team build, interact, making decisions, have self-esteem, and possess cognitive ability (knowledge). What people want from the workplace are challenges, rewards, satisfaction, a sense of belong, and financial and emotional security. Because of recent events creating workplace change, there is a gap between what the workplace offers via opportunities and what employees need.

The statistics of APA indicate that 20-40% of the people in the work force have problems such as Adjustment Disorder, social phobia, and/or are in need of career counseling. This 20-40% creates an immediate opportunity for psychologists in that we have been trained to help people with these problems. Thus, what people today are looking for dovetails precisely into what psychologists can provide.

Your psychological skills could be translated into service to people in the workplace through workshops, continuing professional education, and workplace consultations. Psychologists can help employees with coping skills, social phobias (presentation skills, team building) formats for decision-making and performance evaluation.

What does a healthy workplace need? The key to the workplace is to understand what a business organization is. An organization can be defined as two or more people focused toward a common goal. What an organization does for employees is give them an opportunity to demonstrate their gifts, abilities and talents. The workplace is not a guarantee of employment especially today. For an organization to be healthy it must have several key things in place. An organization must have a vision, leaders and followers (employees), products and services that customers want and or need, competitors, and continued success.

We will briefly explore each of these points and what they have to do to keep and organization healthy and how you as psychologists can help clients in the workplace.

An organization's vision indicates the business that the organization is in and what is to accomplished, it goals, destination and end results. In a way this is similar to setting therapeutic goals for the clients we see. Giving them a direction to having a better quality of life. Every organization needs to have a vision. Employees in that organization, regardless of position, need to know how they fit into that vision so they can focus on utilization of their skills. This will help them feel that they are a part of the organization. This becomes clouded today because on the continual changes in the workplace and the instability the workplace is having. An example of instability is the airline industry. We in Pittsburgh are seeing US Airways filling for protection through bankruptcy. Many thousands of employees in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh will be greatly affected by this action. In today's organizations the vision of change is impacting day-to-day action and creates a high level of stress and anxiety. The organizational vision is as clear as looking out of a front window in a snowy blizzard.

Leadership is always a topic of choice when discussing a healthy workplace. Leaders need to lead, the problem is, in what direction and how fast. The confusion about the vision translates in leaders and followers being reactive rather than proactive in leading their organizations. The Psychologist comes into play here because the outcome of confusions is stress and anxiety

Customers play a vital role in the leader - follower chain of events in that demanding customers may well drive constant change. What will those pesky demanding customers want next? Psychologists again can play a vital role in helping people effectively cope with continual change. Coping skills such as flexibility, the ability to be prepared for the future, and challenging negative thoughts about the future.

Competitors play an important role in business because they validate the product or service the organization offers. However, competition also drives stress and anxiety onto the individuals in the organization.

“In tumultuous times, we need to contemplate and adjust our inner thoughts that drive our actions, emotions, and physical and spiritual well being.” (Gatto, 1995). To be successful, workers need to balance work, family and self. Expectations of long hours, pushing oneself to the limit, are almost a daily occurrence for many. Psychologists can play a very special role in the transition between present day worry and future anxiety. By supporting and helping employees meet today’s challenges we can help organizations remain healthy.

References

Gatto, R. Reflection from the Workplace. Pittsburgh PA: GTA Press 1995.

Gatto, R. The Smart Managers FAQ. San Francisco: Jossey Bass 2000.

Gibson, J. Ivancevich, J. Donnelly, J. Organizational Behavior, Structure Processes. Boston: Irwin McGraw-Hill 1997

Question 1:

For the people in the workplace to be resilient, they need to work for an organization that?

A. is profitable and able to compete in a changing business environment

B. has created a vision, established leadership and followership, generated quality products and services, built a competitive base and continues to succeed

C. has created a vision, has effective policies and procedures generated quality products and services, and is profitable

D. has created a vision, an effective business strategy, policy and procedures and has dictatorial leadership

Question 2:

Psychologists can play a very special role in the transition between present day worry and future anxiety.

A. By supporting and helping employees meet today's challenges.

B. By testing employees and identifying the skills needed to meet today's challenges.

C. By supporting organizations in developing strategic and succession plans.

D. By identifying poor performers and providing counseling to those employees.