Meeting fundamental human needs is vital to promote psychological health in the workplace

Michel Vézina, M.D., M.P.H., Université Laval and Institut national de santé publique du Québec

Context

Aware of the significant increase in work-related mental health problems, the Mental Health Commission of Canada has called upon the Canadian Standards Association (also known as the CSA Group) and the Bureau de normalisation du Québec (BNQ), to develop a standard in view of making workplaces psychologically healthy and safe (CSA – Z 1003/BNQ 9700-803-7).

Using the results of several scientific studies as a reference point, the working group developing this standard identified a number of fundamental human needs as strategic elements of their proposal needs that must be met to ensure the psychological stability of an individual. This approach serves a dual purpose as it accommodates both workplace mental health promotion and mental illness prevention objectives. In fact, when these fundamental needs are not adequately fulfilled, or are threatened, they become risk factors for psychological distress, and should therefore be the focus of prevention programs. Moreover, in terms of mental health promotion, these needs should also be focused on and supported within an organization in view of promoting the well-being and psychological health of employees.

In addition to the fundamental need for workplace safety, other needs identified in the standard are as follows:

- **The need for autonomy and achievement**: having a certain degree of control over assigned work, using and developing abilities and skills, using creative potential, feeling effective and being able to take on appropriate challenges.

- **The need for belonging and affiliation**: receiving support from colleagues and management to help face difficulties, and instil pride in the organization and team.

- **The need for self-esteem**: receiving recognition for efforts and accomplishments, feeling useful and sure of having a status within the organization.

- **The need for social justice**: being treated with fairness and respect by colleagues and management.

What can a company do to ensure employees can meet these fundamental needs? Studies show there are many management practices that can be implemented to reach this objective.

For instance, to fulfil the need for autonomy and achievement, employees must be allowed to have enough influence within the company and to participate in decisions that affect them, especially regarding what work methods, procedures and tools are most suitable. In this context, autonomy is also a feeling of freedom to express ideas about the nature of the work and ways to accomplish it.
However, we must be wary of what some refer to as the “autonomy trap”, which is nearly limitless autonomy accompanied by increasingly higher goals to be reached in return. This is why autonomy is linked to the need for support and access to technical or human resources that help employees produce quality work. Managers concerned with fulfilling this need must be readily available, possess adequate listening skills, and provide employees with a relevant presence. Being aware of difficulties encountered by personnel, responding to their suggestions within a reasonable time frame and quickly resolving conflicts are also ways to offer support and develop a sense of belonging and affiliation.

The need for recognition, linked to self-esteem, requires repeated, sincere and discrete shows of appreciation for accomplishments and efforts. For this to occur, management must have full knowledge of the inherent difficulties and requirements of an employee’s work. To show recognition, one must first know what deserves recognition, and that means having knowledge of possible unforeseen events, uncontrolled deadlines, and a lack of coordination and collaboration between personnel. Good knowledge of employees’ work and professional requirements are essential, particularly when substantial workloads are involved. During a survey I conducted in Quebec, one health professional told me: “What they ask us to do, and what the standards say, compared to what we actually have the means to do… it’s like two different worlds… And then they leave us with a guilty conscience.”[Translation]. This situation leads to a state of ethical suffering, highlighting the importance of establishing performance standards after consulting the people they are to affect.

Finally, the need for social justice requires an absence of workplace discrimination or favouritism, especially regarding workload distribution, promotions, days off, training or professional development activities, as well as when enforcing policies and disciplinary measures.

Respecting these fundamental needs has a positive impact on the psychological health of personnel, and the health of the entire organization. A 2008 survey conducted in 52 American companies showed that 85% of new employees lose their initial enthusiasm within the first six months, with a continuing decline over the following years (Sirota, Mischkind, & Meltzer, 2008). What did the most enthusiastic employees have in common? The survey indicated that motivation and engagement are related to feelings of achievement, respect and recognition, as well as workplace camaraderie (belonging and affiliation).

Conclusion

In short, the Canadian standard that seeks to make workplaces psychologically healthy and safe provides companies with a comprehensive framework, which will allow them to prevent psychological distress and promote mental health among their personnel, resulting in a healthier organization.

Bibliography


For more information on the Canadian standard in view of making workplaces psychologically healthy and safe (CSA - Z 1003/BNQ 9700-803-7), visit the website http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/Pages/workplace_guide.aspx