

## **A Positive Working Environment – Does your workplace qualify?**

By Patrick J. Psaila

Michael was a dedicated hardworking sales executive in a services company. As business grew so did his responsibilities and his workload. Michael soon began to spend longer and longer hours at work trying to cope with his situation. As the weeks turned into months he was getting more and more tired, neglecting his personal, social and family life. He found himself constantly fighting fires, always falling behind schedule and feeling overwhelmed most of the day. The situation reached a point where he decided to approach his boss and ask him for support. The response he got was..”there are many people who want your job, you are replaceable, if you can’t take the heat get out of the kitchen!”

Susan was a middle manager in a manufacturing company. She had an excellent track record and was always looked upon as an exemplary manager. When she refused the invitation to date one of the senior managers things started going mysteriously wrong. Suddenly she was being heavily monitored. Although she regularly stayed on after hours to finish her work, she was criticized for coming in ten minutes late in the morning, something that was never an issue before. She was given impossible deadlines, exceedingly challenging tasks to complete with no support to complete them. She was refused leave when she needed it and was practically interrogated if she took a day of sick leave. Eventually, the pressure got so bad that she decided to leave the company. Before she left the senior manager who she had turned down told her, “you didn’t have to end this way.”

Regretfully, these have become common stories in today’s adrenaline-charged, crisis-driven and macho business environment. We are focusing on short-term results with a quasi macchiavellian “make it at all costs attitude” at the expense of long-term sustainability. Power is often abused and misused for selfish means. In my work as a psychologist and trainer in organizations I have heard many of these work horror stories. Unfortunately human casualties end up having to leave their work, often feeling that somehow it was their fault and that they failed to manage the situation effectively.

Our bodies are simply not equipped to live under constant excessive pressure and stress. Our built-in stress response is a mechanism that helps us deal with emergencies and crisis. Making this a daily part of our life wreaks havoc in our brain and body. Research clearly shows that working under constant unreasonable pressure and stress taxes our immune system making us more vulnerable to illness and disease. It triggers off a range of negative emotions such as anxiety and feeling down, and reduces overall effectiveness. It is therefore, in everyone’s best interest, even for the business, to create positively charged working environments that respect the dignity and well-being of employees.

Years of research on employee performance indicates that people want more than money from their work for them to feel satisfied and motivated. Amongst other things, employees at all levels of organisations are deeply affected by the quality of their relationships at the workplace, especially with their supervisors, managers, or people they regard in high esteem. They want to feel appreciated, valued, cared for and respected in the same way that they would within a family. Once the material and financial requirements are satisfactorily met, the primary needs that people have at work are emotional. In a research study that identified some of the best companies that one could work for in the U.K., the overriding factor distinguishing the top companies was the quality of life they offered at work. The most important factors that determined this were: respect for the individual, a friendly non-aggressive environment, a relationship of trust and openness between management and the rest of the staff, and opportunities for learning and development. Many times, the greener pastures employees move to do not consist of better benefits or higher financial gains. They go to organisations that provide them with a human working environment that values its people and treats them with dignity and respect.

The onus for creating organizations that are conducive to sustainable high levels of performance falls upon the leaders. The following are characteristics of positive working environments that make people want to work in them and give their best. As you read through you may want to compare the organization you work with to these characteristics. This will give you rough estimate of how “people oriented” your organization is.

### **A friendly non-aggressive environment**

Every leader in an organisation is responsible for encouraging and promoting working environments where people can work freely without the constant fear and tension of aggressive outbursts from their colleagues, managers, or other employees. People are encouraged to speak up when they disagree or have a different opinion. This behaviour is encouraged as long as it respects other people. There are healthy outlets for the expression of disagreement and grievances. These help to regularly resolve potentially cumulative feelings of anger that could result in destructive outbursts. There is zero tolerance for bullying or harrassment. These are immensely harmful to people’s well-being and have seriously damaging effects on an organisation’s human environment and reputation. There are clear policies that give people a clear course of action if they are being treated unfairly. Respect towards people is never compromised no matter how much pressure there is. People are listened to without being patronised, dismissed, or ignored. Company policies are applied equally, fairly and consistently. Disciplinary procedures are clear, fair and transparent.

### **A culture of consultation and involvement.**

A frequent source of stress in the workplace is when leaders make decisions about people's work without consulting them for their opinion. Almost any decision that excludes the person doing the work is perceived negatively and can give rise to feelings of anger, frustration and disappointment towards the organisation. In organisations that value their people, employees are consulted and involved in decisions that affect them in any way. They are listened to and taken seriously. Although this may prolong the decision making process, in the long run these organisations get more "buy-in" and people will take better ownership of decisions. There is appreciation of the impact of changes in such areas as working hours, pay, benefits, overtime, dress codes, office location, job requirements, and working conditions. These factors have a high level of importance for employees and changes can cause serious negative reactions. Timely and proactive responses to questions and concerns of employees are provided. Employees are given regular honest feedback about their performance aimed at helping them develop and improve their skills.

### **People feel a sense of belonging to the organisation**

The organisation's vision, mission, values and goals are clearly communicated to all people in an organisation. People need to feel that they are part of a larger picture as this creates a sense of safety and direction. If they understand the direction, and their role in achieving desired outcomes, they can effectively contribute more. As much information as possible is communicated to employees using means that are available to all and accessible by all. This reduces feelings of being left out, ignored, stressed, and anxious. There is a culture of care throughout the organisation and people are regarded as whole persons with lives and experiences that reach far beyond the boundaries of the workplace. There is an atmosphere of support and solidarity that is honoured at the top level of the organisation and cascaded and spread throughout it.

### **Adequate support is provided for people to do their work effectively.**

People are given challenging demands that stretch their abilities and constantly challenge them to become better at what they do. At the same time people are provided with the necessary equipment, resources and guidance to carry out their work effectively. Furthermore, they are offered the necessary training to help them develop themselves personally and professionally. These opportunities are provided fairly so that no-one feels that preferences are being made. This applies for systems of rewards and recognition. These are some of the strongest sources of motivation and raising staff morale. They also increase employee's sense of loyalty and pride towards the organisation if they are given fairly.

It is ultimately the responsibility of the leadership team to make sure that the abovementioned characteristics are woven into the organisation at the level of its vision, mission, values, and actual behaviours. Leaders need to believe in the value of these characteristics even in the fact that they make business sense. Today there is ample research based evidence to show that it is only organisations that are based on values of respect, fairness, dignity, compassion, and solidarity that succeed in the long term. This may be hard to believe when we look around us but time will tell.