Mental Health and Organizational Support, from *Growing a Healthy Workforce*, by Andrew L. McCart

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"Innovative leaders go beyond stress management and they make employees' day-to-day work less stressful."

The sixth topic on the CDC's Health Score Card (HSC) is stress management. Stress in the workplace has received increasing attention in recent years and the CDC HSC focuses on ways employers can support the mental health of their employees. One study in Europe's largest employer, the National Health Service, found that 30% of sickness absence is due to stress. (Blake & Lee, 2007) In the CDC HSC, employers can earn points for providing a space for deep-breathing exercises and other relaxation activities. Social events such as team-building activities, picnics, company anniversaries and holiday parties, or employee sports teams have the ability to meet the social needs of employees.

To earn points on the CDC HSC, organizations can provide stress management programs, either online, onsite, or offsite. These may include work life balance skills programs, stress reduction, and stress identification skills. Stress related issues can include changes in work schedules, time management demands, specific work practices, and work processes. The organization in the automobile parts manufacturing industry stated that some employees "turn off the lights, turn the TV on and they walk on treadmills clear their minds."

Authors in the workplace wellness literature suggest that innovative leaders go beyond stress management programs and they make employees' day-to-day work less stressful. Employers can address the stress reduction part of the culture and climate of the organization by creating the following aspects in the organizational climate:

- "Setting guidelines for meetings (e.g., a clearly defined agenda, a firm start and end time, and

actionable outcomes rather than free-flowing discussion that leaves people feeling their time was wasted).

- Fostering connections between new and long-term employees with mentoring relationships.

- Celebrating successes on a regular basis in a way that demonstrates how each member of the team helped the company to achieve a goal and shows employees how their work is meaningful.

- Allowing flexible schedules can go a long way toward reducing stress.

- Teaching employees how to use technology to their advantage (e.g. managing interruptions, avoiding the tendency to become slaves to their e-mail.)

- Involving supervisors in managing employees' stress by regularly reviewing team workloads and dynamics and sharing values and results." (Dee W. Edington, 2015)

Organizations can provide stress management programs, either online, onsite, or offsite that include work life balance skills programs, stress reduction, and stress identification skills. Participants in a workplace study on online support and stress management found that "the percentage of participants who reported practicing meditation at least once per week was greater among those with group support than without group support; 94% versus 54%." (Allexandre et al., 2016) Employees also benefit by being included in the decision-making process for issues that impact job stress. Stress related issues can include changes in work schedules, time management demands, specific work practices, and work processes. Additionally, a positive and optimistic manage can lead to the same behavior traits in employees. (Alyssa B. Schultz, 2007)

An automobile manufacturer provides several conference rooms where at breaks and lunches some employees are doing bible study. The Corporate Care Manager shared that:

"You'll walk by and there'll be six guys sitting around there with the Bible out. Some of them are just in there with their head up against the walls."

The Wellness Trainer further explained that "we use a lot of rooms multi-purposely. If I were going to do lunch time yoga, I would have to jump into a conference room and say 'everybody come in,' turn the lights down, or something like that."

This organization also has a leadership development class where stress management has been brought up. The HR team stated that at the last class, the group suggested a program for people with posttraumatic stress disorder. Additionally, their Continuous Improvement program helps because "employees turn in ideas to reduce hard work which creates stress. We really push 'what makes your day difficult?'"

An organization in education services stated that they have the stress free zones. These zones are more utilized during midterm and final exams when students or employees are more likely to experience stress. The organization in the technical services industry stated that "there is an area like the break room, (where) a lot of people just go in there and actually sit and eat their lunch in there rather than at their desk. This takes them away from their desk."

Additionally, the technical services company has "holiday parties, team building events, or a group happy hour

event if (they) have a really great week or really great quarter." This organization also allows employees to have input in decisions about work processes. In the words of the Senior Recruiter, "it depends on who you are and how much time here you have with the company. But, I would say yeah, everyone still has a say but I think once you have a little bit more respect in the pit, your voice is definitely a little bit more heard."

The organizations in the highest-scoring category of this study have a number of different methods for addressing stress in their workforce. Some organizations have a morning meeting where employees and leadership can share ideas on how to make the work processes and environment better. The interviewees shared that "you can show up at the morning meeting before they start production and find out what the downfall was yesterday, or how did production run yesterday, what's the plan today to do anything differently, are we planning machine down time or something like that." They feel that giving employees an overview of the bigger picture really helps them in terms of stress management and knowing the overall plan for the day's production.

An organization in educational services industry helps employees manage stress in a number of ways, including social events, private counseling, and an 'open door policy' with Human Resources. According to the interviewee,

> *"We have at least quarterly events for employees, like a cookout, Christmas dinner, and all sorts of social events."*

She continued that "you can either go to the staff counselor or HR with issues on any kind of workplace issues that you're having. And, we have a counseling service onsite and it's free for the employees and students."

Another manufacturer in this group conducted a training program to help employees and managers recognize and deal with stress. The interviewee described it as an event "related to stress relief, but it was with giant rubber bands. So it's like a stretch but it was about the topic of stress relief. Because stress can relate to physical injuries, so it was just more like releasing tension." This is the also the organization that discussed the Monday and Wednesday yoga classes in the physical movement section.

Similar to the conference rooms mentioned earlier, another manufacturer in this group has a break room where employees can decompress.

> *"We also have private 'phone booths' throughout the building. In a cubicle culture, this feature allows employees to find privacy for phone calls stress management, or to think through a particular issue without any distractions."*

The interviewee stated that the phone booths received a lot of criticism before they were implemented, but now they are being used widely. Additionally, this organization has company dinners that are sponsored every year where a department can go out to dinner together.

Read more in the upcoming book, *Growing a Healthy Workforce*, by Andrew L. McCart
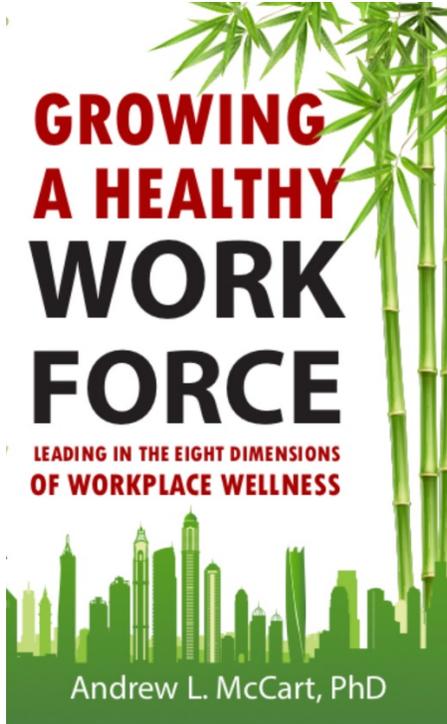
GROWING A HEALTHY WORK FORCE

LEADING IN THE EIGHT DIMENSIONS OF WORKPLACE WELLNESS

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