Creating psychologically healthy workplace environments for occupational therapists: Workplace culture

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Psychological Health and Safety in the Occupational Therapy Workplace

Workplace culture has been shown to have positive effects on employee health and productivity (Centre for Applied Research in Mental Health and Addiction (2012). According to Schein organizational culture can be defined as,

> a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (2004, p. 17)

In the workplace, attitudes, values, and beliefs that are shared and are established over time shape behaviours and the work environment affecting mental and physical health (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, 2012). The main characteristics of culture include trust, honesty and fairness (CARMHA, 2012). In a positive workplace culture, all groups are accountable, everyone's ideas, values, and beliefs are important, issues are managed appropriately, there is strong group cohesion, and trust between management and employees is strong (CSA Group, 2014).

Poor workplace culture can lead to negative outcomes and lower employee commitment, loyalty, empowerment, and engagement leading to negative health outcomes and burnout (Spence Laschinger, Finegan & Shamian, 2001). Occupational therapists may feel that they are immune to workplace culture but one can imagine how rumours of impending staff cut backs in an already stretched OT unit with poor employer-employee relations can affect employee morale, trust and eventually health. It is possible that in that case OTs may face issues with burnout and depersonalization and worse patient care.

There appears to be some research that interventions can be put in place that have an effect on culture and lead to positive outcomes (Glisson, Dukes & Green, 2006; Leiter, Laschinger, Daye & Oore, 2011). A study of 41 hospital units employing the Civility, Respect, Engagement at Work (CREW) intervention showed improvement in depersonalization rates, increased job satisfaction, reduced absenteeism, and increased civility, respect and trust of management (Leiter et al., 2011). A study of child welfare caseworkers employing the Availability, Responsiveness, Continuity (ARC) intervention demonstrated improvement in burnout components of emotional exhaustion and interpersonalization (Glisson et al., 2006).

Changing workplace culture is a dedicated process that requires planning, commitment from all parties and 3 to 5 years for change to take hold (Lowe, 2004). A resource such as Guarding Minds @ Work can be employed as a multi faceted approach to evaluating workplace culture, identifying areas of improvement and developing strategies for implementing workplace change. Change can be focused on areas such as: work environment (i.e. norms, values & practices, training and development (i.e. conflict management), communication (i.e. encouraging

face to face communication), and formal policies & programs (i.e. a publicly available mission statement centered on trust, honesty and fairness) (CARMHA, 2012).

In examining workplace culture, the critical factor to creating a healthy workplace culture is establishing trust (Lowe, 2004). This trust-based culture should ensure that employees feel valued and respected (Lowe, 2004). Ultimately, a healthier workplace will lead to better health outcomes for individuals and increased productivity for the organization (CARMHA, 2012).

RESOURCES

Guarding Minds @ Work http://www.guardingmindsatwork.ca

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