

by Yvonne Thompson

LOOKING BEYOND PILATES

Benefits are important, but organizational wellness starts with leadership.



Illustration: Christianne Williams

Many years ago I accepted a management position with a large transportation company. My job was to manage 125 employees at a 24/7 warehouse with a \$15 million budget. I was excited! What a great opportunity.

I soon discovered the employees were in open warfare with management. Just being a manager meant being the enemy.

I wondered how such a large group of people could become so angry and bitter that they would openly sabotage every effort made by management. I believe in the best of people and really wanted to understand.

Having practiced effective leadership and read every book on the subject, I found myself launched into the most amazing leadership challenge of my career.

Now, many years later and the founding member of a firm that specializes in organizational wellness, I undertake this challenge on a regular basis. I am often asked if this means I set up noon-hour Pilates classes for companies. The answer is no. Our approach to organizational wellness includes boosting the health and wellness of every aspect of a company.

We conduct perception surveys in an effort to understand how the employees feel about working for a particular company. We determine the gaps in communication, inclusion and engagement of the employees themselves. This information supplies us with an understanding of the internal leadership within the company.

We audit the safety program to determine gaps in safety culture and the level of commitment to a safe environment. We also analyze the non-monetary benefits for employees, such as nutritional cafeterias, fitness classes and smoking

cessation programs. Caring for the whole person is the key.

Some call this corporate culture, but culture doesn't necessarily encompass all aspects of work life.

A solid commitment

Many companies fixate on a few strategic goals such as reducing injuries, increasing

output or improving customer satisfaction. These goals are all possible through one comprehensive wellness approach and a solid commitment to valuing, promoting and rewarding positive leadership. Leadership is a series of learned behaviours that, once implemented, can take you anywhere.

Successful leadership behaviours are based on one common fundamental, a strong genuine caring for people. In the past employers expected employees to keep their personal lives at home. The line between our professional and personal lives has since become very grey, and as a result people expect genuine caring.

To build a foundation of caring, a leadership program must include:

- full commitment and inclusion of senior management
- perception surveys and gap fulfillment
- group learning on subjects like value clarification, communication, team-building, risk taking and finding your courage, and rules of engagement and disengagement.
- one-on-one coaching
- mentorship
- formal and regular evaluations to obtain clear direct feedback from stakeholders
- recruitment practices that put attitude rather than skills at the top of the requirement list
- incentive programs for all who actively participate
- ongoing initiatives with a beginning but no end, and
- resources allocated to the formal leadership program every year.

When you have a formal leadership program based on caring for others as part of your business, budget and daily

practices you can accomplish anything. It is easy to execute one goal after another. Each team within the organization can have its own unique goal or goals. For instance, a workgroup or team could decide that its strategic goal for the quarter is to have 100% near miss reporting. Teams develop the ideas, implement and execute the plan, as well as evaluate the results.

With today's labour shortage, having a leadership program based on caring for others will position you as an employer of choice. While other companies struggle to recruit and maintain their talent, those with this approach to wellness will be many steps ahead.

As for my management position with the transportation company, it was the most rewarding experience of my career. When I disengaged three years later, the anger had subsided and there was guarded trust. I was no longer the enemy. Open warfare to open wellness is a long-term commitment requiring huge transformational change.

I continue to stay in touch with people who were clear adversaries at the time. One person in particular recently stopped by my office. After a lengthy conversation and some catching up, we thanked each other for the growing experience. I was able to observe the power of leadership through caring and my former colleague gained the ability to see that change is possible and that all managers are not the enemy.

On My Reading List

Some of my favorite leadership reads are

- *Leadership is an Art*, by Max Depree.
- *The 7 Levels of Change*, by Rolf Smith
- *First Break All The Rules*, by Marcus Buckingham, and
- *Value Shift* by John Izzo and Pam Withers.

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