



Managing your survivors

You can't make the economy better, but you can make it less sickening for your employees.

And "sickening" it is - literally.

Studies show that

- people who feel insecure in their job report poorer health (Insecurity is a common side effect of seeing co-workers lose their jobs.)
- people who feel that their effort is not rewarded take more sick time (Layoff survivors tend to do more work for the same money.)
- people who feel they are treated unfairly at work have more heart disease and are more likely to have sleep problems
- men in a stressful work environment are more likely to abuse alcohol and to develop coronary heart disease
- financial insecurity leads to more illness of all types

In good and bad economic times, the workplace has a large and unique impact on each employee's health. A full-time employee spends 2,000 hours per year at work; an average American spends less than 2 hours per year with a doctor. Clearly, the work place has an edge when it comes to influencing the employee's health: the employer creates and influences the environment that dominates the employee's time.

One of the major impacts a workplace has is how it treats its people. Treating employees fairly and respectfully may seem difficult when layoffs, furlough days, and pay cuts are looming. But it may be the most valuable thing you can do: It has been shown to improve employees' health, which in turn can boost the company's bottom line.

Consider how your employee survivors would answer these questions:

- Do you get consistent information from line management (your superior)?
- Do you get sufficient information from line management (your superior)?
- When you are having difficulties at work, how often is your superior willing to listen to your problems?
- Do you ever get criticized unfairly?
- Do you ever get praised for your work?

Men who had more “seldom” and “never” answers had a 30% to 50% higher risk of poor health; women were 10% to 30% more likely to have poor health. The “seldom” and “never” group had higher psychological stress, higher blood cholesterol, and higher blood pressure.

If your employees answer these questions “sometimes” or “often,” then you have good social support at work – termed “relational justice” by social scientists. This will help them feel acknowledged, and keep them at their desks. In one study, poor relational justice led

to more sick days for women. Men were prone to longer spells of sick days when they felt that their effort was not rewarded. Reward is not just wages, but also social approval.

What can employers do? Anything that reduces employees' uncertainty, and that boosts their feelings of being respected and valued will help. Examples:

- Train supervisors to welcome feedback from staff.
- Get company news out as quickly as possible.
- Applaud good work publicly and frequently.

When justice improved – that is, employees got more information from their managers, felt valued and respected, and perceived that decisions were fair – employee health improved, especially for men.

Employees whose work place justice improved had less coronary heart disease. They had less time away from work for sickness. They slept better. They drank less. Their cholesterol, blood pressure, and psychological stress were lower. These changes occurred no matter what the employees had for other health factors. In other words, losing weight reduces a person's heart disease risk and so does having a good work place.

A good, just workplace may be an employer's best tool to promote employee wellness.

by Linda K. Riddell, M.S.
Health Economy LLC
www.HealthEconomy.net