



e-quilibrium

- *"electronic briefs on behavior and health"*

Volume 2, Number 11
November 2006

Fairy Tale and Faring Well

"Mental health is the ability to love and to work." This quote is widely attributed to Sigmund Freud but others suggest that it was actually Erik Erikson's misquote of Freud. Either way, it makes good sense to me to suggest that mental health allows us to function well in relationships, and in work. In this edition of **e-quilibrium**, I want to discuss some of the circumstances that can interfere with a person's ability to function well at work, factors that can be addressed. Because the health of the organizations for which we work or with which we interact affects the quality of our lives, this review will be approached from the perspective of the health of organizations. The starting point is a familiar fairy tale.

Walt Disney's adaptation of Grimm's fairy tale, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, was revolutionary in the motion picture industry as it was the first animated film in color produced for the big screen. The Disney version also forever transformed the fairy tale in that Disney named the seven dwarfs. The names chosen were descriptive of behavioral features of the seven miners... Grumpy, Sleepy, Dopey, Sneezy, Bashful, Doc, and Happy.

Although Walt Disney was known to have much foresight in the business world, it is unlikely that he was anticipating contemporary challenges to employee well being and productivity when he named the Seven Dwarfs. Nonetheless, several of the names are representative of threats to worker wellness and effectiveness.

Let's start with the miner whom we most readily associate with poor mental health, "Grumpy." Depression costs businesses billions of dollars annually, in part because depression is responsible for more absenteeism and disability days than medical conditions such as heart disease, back pain, and diabetes. Depressed workers have annual medical care costs that are 70% higher than their non-depressed counterparts. Furthermore, when at work, depressed individuals simply aren't as productive. Depression is typically quite treatable and there is increasing evidence that certain cognitive and behavioral skills can help prevent it.

Next we'll consider "Sleepy." We have become a society of sleep-deprived individuals. According to the National Sleep Foundation, more than half of workers report that sleepiness on the job interferes with their productivity. As time without sleep increases, cognitive function is increasingly impaired, similar to an individual under the influence of alcohol. While we strictly frown on having alcohol-impaired persons on the job, it is common to have sleep-deprived individuals at work.

Speaking of alcohol, consider "Dopey." The use of alcohol and illicit drugs continues to undermine productivity in the United States, and drug prevention and intervention programs can be found in most organizations. But interestingly, there is another drug problem. The cost of prescription drugs is one of the most significant factors in the increasing cost of health care, leading more and more businesses to be unable to offer health care coverage to employees. Here's where Grumpy and Dopey get together, because the drugs most responsible for the increased costs in recent years have been antidepressants.

"Sneezy" also brings health care costs to mind. Health care insurance is one of the most prized employee benefits but costs perennially outpace inflation. In an effort to help control increasing costs, over 90% of organizations offer some type of health promotion programming. Indeed, the benefit to cost ratio of health promotion programs is usually at least 2:1. Unfortunately, this is far short of the potential return on health promotion initiatives because many programs fail to reach the specific employees with the greatest potential for improved or well-maintained health. This is gradually changing, illustrated by recent reports of how General Motors is taking steps to be

more active in the prevention and management of diabetes in their workforce.

“Bashful” characterizes the employee who needs training in personal and interpersonal skills, what in the past were considered “soft skills.” Today’s emphasis on teamwork, shifting work groups, and the need for input from all segments of the workforce makes interpersonal competency as essential as technical proficiency for maximum productivity. Beyond productivity, interpersonal effectiveness contributes to employee and customer satisfaction, both of which help organizations’ bottom lines.

Although the name “Doc” might imply a health professional, in this review “Doc” represents one of the most important segments of today’s workforce, the knowledge worker. Recruiting and retaining “gold collar” workers is a critical challenge for human resource departments, and demographic projections show that the problem is unlikely to disappear. One of the characteristics of this employee class is the desire for a quality of life that includes meaningful work-life balance. Organizations that recognize that support of an employee’s non-work life is good business are transforming their cultures and management practices in ways that attract and retain these employees.

The last of the seven dwarfs is “Happy,” a desired state for employees. Productivity is better when employees are healthy, have high morale, and are committed to the organization. Organizational investment in worker well being is a win-win proposition. While having a good job and a supportive work environment contribute to employee satisfaction, the degree of happiness that people bring to their jobs matters even more. That is, happy people like their jobs!

Obviously, no organization (or individual within an organization) can completely eliminate productivity loss associated with depression, sleep-deprivation, poor health habits, drug use, negative work to home and home to work spillover, or inadequate personal and interpersonal skills. Similarly, solutions to the problem of increasing health insurance costs that have broad-based acceptability have been elusive.

In the fairy tale, Snow White was able to bring out the best in the crew of miners, particularly as they faced a crisis. Organizations are essentially groups of individual people. To the extent that each of us has a role in the organizations for which we work and with which we are involved, our own health behaviors represent an important contribution to the health of these organizations. Employee health contributes to productivity, which benefits the health of the economy, which in turn helps each of us fare well.

Paul J. Hershberger, Ph.D.

... is a clinical health psychologist. He is an Associate Professor of Family Medicine, and Director of Behavioral Science for the Dayton Community Family Medicine Residency Program, Wright State University Boonshoft School of Medicine. His clinical practice includes psychotherapy, consultation, and coaching.

To subscribe to this e-newsletter, send an e-mail message to requests@somlist.wright.edu and put the following in the subject line:
subscribe som_e-equilibrium

If you do not wish to receive this e-newsletter, send an e-mail message to requests@somlist.wright.edu and put the following in the subject line:
unsubscribe som_e-equilibrium

If you wish to read previous newsletters, you may find them at:
www.med.wright.edu/fm/equilibrium/

To contact Dr. Hershberger:
e-mail: paul.hershberger@wright.edu
phone: (937) 278-6251, ext 2021