

## **Workplace Psycho-social Toxicity**

### **A Keynote Address Presented at the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) 4<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference The Way Forward: Putting the ACT into ACTION August 13-15, 2008, Delta Chelsea Hotel, Toronto**

Prepared by John Yardley, Ph.D.,  
President, Metrics@Work and  
Managing Director, Workplace Health Research Laboratory, Brock University  
www.metricsatwork.com 1-800-726-4082, ext. 22

#### **Introduction**

The thesis of this address is that the front-line of work organizations, i.e., those involved in the provision of services, or the production and sales of products, are “the heart of the organization” for which they work. In the education sector, this places schools and their classrooms and those that provide teaching and learning environments for students (e.g., principals, teachers, support and custodial staff, and other education professionals), as being clearly at the front of their school boards and the education system. Further, I believe the front-line in many of our work organizations is where we need to focus more of our people management attention than is currently the case.

In the education system, this attention is needed in order to create great places to work, which leads to (among other values) two valued work force outcomes: 1. great retention rates, i.e., teacher and staff turnover and exiting their professions will reduce; and, 2. great attraction rates, i.e., more and better teachers and staff are attracted to work in our schools and school systems. This is, in essence, the hallmark of “magnet schools”, those that retain and attract the best work forces. The logical conclusions to having “better” workforces are better student and school outcomes, which are, of course, what our governments, our parents (and students), and our education professionals want.

So, to use the OECTA Conference theme, “Putting the ACT into ACTION”, from the point of view of my particular training (i.e., as an organizational psychologist) means putting more effort into understanding, intervening, and evaluating school-based people management actions that, in turn, create better work and learning environments and outcomes.

#### **Local (i.e., School) Work Environments**

Having been a teacher in primary, secondary and tertiary education systems, I know how easy it is to think of one's classroom work as “independent”, which can be indicated by phrases such as teachers referring to their work with phrases such as “my classroom”, “my students”, “my syllabus/curriculum” etc. However, such terms belie the fact that almost all the education work that we do is interdependent. For instance, custodial staff clean and prepare the environments we work in; administrative staff support with attendance checks, taking phone calls and maintaining the budget and administrative operation of the schools; and that other support services help with student learning difficulties or provide specialist education supports.

Further, as in many professional fields, collaboration, and learning from each other's experiences help us overcome obstacles and enrich our ability to teach and foster learning, which is why "Building Networks for Learning" are currently being advocated as a model of what is required to create focused conversations across schools and boards (Katz, 2008). Examples of behaviours or programs that support professional networks of learning are: collaborative planning, teacher moderation, professional development and training, coaching and mentoring, which are all part of our education systems.

Finally, most of our schools are arranged in some functional way. For instance, as elementary schools usually group students by age ranges / grades such as Kindergarten, Primary, Junior and Intermediate. In our secondary schools, function is often represented by subject areas / departments such as Sciences, Mathematics, Arts and Music, and Languages, which are usually managed by Department Heads.

These elements of the way we do education work indicate that "teams" and "teamwork" are important in the way our education system delivers its services. Creating positive, collaborative, supportive and innovative local work environments should, therefore, be not only a strategic imperative (e.g., at the School Board level), but also a desired local imperative (e.g., within each school).

## **Engagement and Psycho-social Toxicity**

Creating strong positive local work environments is related to two opposing outcomes that are currently receiving a lot of media attention, are the focus of academic research, and have created practitioner interest and training: 1. engagement and, 2. psycho-social toxicity. Engagement is a positive factor, so higher levels of it are desirable. Psycho-social toxicity, on the other hand, is negative, so low-to-no levels of it are desirable, which is why I use the phrase "opposing outcomes."

Unfortunately, the meaning of the relatively new concept of employee engagement is still being debated, defined and validated (see, for instance, Meyer, 2008). The business and consulting use of the term is also not consistent since, as Macey and Schneider (2008) state, its use is, "ambiguous among both academic researchers and among practitioners who use it in conversations with clients" (p. 3). At Metrics@Work we generally measure engagement with a form of job engagement developed by Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova (2006), which measures what is called state engagement. According to Macey and Schneider's model, state engagement is a predictor of behavioural engagement, which is composed of behaviours such as discretionary effort or extra-role behaviours. Clearly school work forces that provide higher levels of discretionary effort and extra-role behaviours are going to be more productive, more energetic and, therefore, more likely to create the valued outcomes that we want of them. Metrics@Work has found very distinct, very clear, and consistent findings that creating great local work environments is strongly related to higher levels of engagement.

As education professionals you will be much more used to reading or hearing about playground bullying, which has been an area of concern for educators for a long time, but still receiving a high profile through research and prevention programs (see for instance, Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). However, I refer, in this presentation to bullying in the work place a psycho-social toxicity, which is also variously known as incivility, mobbing, harassment etc.

While sexual harassment and violence in the work place tends to garner the media headlines, research conducted by Metrics@Work shows that those behaviours are very low in frequency (e.g., Yardley and Noka, 2008). In contrast, psycho-socially toxic behaviours, such as yelling at people, put downs, withholding work information from others, devaluing work, and ignoring or isolating individuals is much more frequent, at least 10-15 times more frequent than the more violent or invasive types of uncivil behaviours. In spite of psycho-social incivilities being less severe, research demonstrates when these behaviours occur frequently and chronically (i.e., at least weekly for six months) they can have strong impacts on work and personal health. Metrics@Work has found very distinct, very clear, and consistent findings that creating great local work environments is strongly related to lower levels of psycho-social toxicity.

## School Leadership

I have deliberately used the phrase “Front-line” to represent schools’ teachers and staff, as opposed to describing these people as being at the “Bottom” of the education system. Typically the front-line is characterized as the bottom of an organization with the executive and Board of Trustees forming the “top” or “apex” and the schools and their staffs arrayed at the bottom. That would be typical, for instance, of an organizational chart representing a school board. It is also the case that these pyramidal structures typify schools that are organized and run in a hierarchical fashion and top-to-bottom models suggest processes that can be detrimental to the creation of positive work environments. For instance, they are typically associated with more autocratic, policy and procedurally driven, less innovative, and more controlled types of work environments. These models also do not represent well the team oriented, distributed and dynamic forms of leadership, which we know are more representative of modern leadership approaches.

In some leadership models this geometric representation is reversed, e.g., Servant Leadership models. For instance, the Wikipedia website under Servant Leadership states, “Unlike leadership approaches with a top-down hierarchical style, Servant Leadership instead emphasizes collaboration, trust, empathy, and the ethical use of power. At heart, the individual is a servant first, making the conscious decision to lead in order to better serve others, not to increase their own power. The objective is to enhance the growth of individuals in the organization and increase teamwork and personal involvement.” (Wikipedia, 2008)

Further, the word “Leader” exists in leadership and it is often assumed that leadership is about a person or a position. However, as Warren Bennis (2007) states, “... the only person who practices leadership alone in a room **is a psychotic**” (p. 3.). Modern approaches to work place leadership (e.g., Mintzberg, 2006; Bennis, 2007) underscore, in particular, that leadership is not a person or a title / position, but rather it is the work processes and behaviours that describe what groups of people (e.g., school teams) do together to get their work done. School teams require sustained high degrees of collaboration, energy and engagement in order to be optimally productive. These types of work teams also frequently demonstrate distributed and dynamic forms of leadership where the strengths of the team, and work that needs to be performed by that team, create different roles for people at different times, rather than the leaders being the single identified “head.” Therefore, group phenomena such as trust, respect, support and fairness, become the “glue” that holds a team and, ultimately, a work organization

together. Metrics@Work has found that these team glue elements are strongly represented in high engagement, and poorly represented in psycho-socially toxic, work environments.

So, in conclusion, I think a way forward, in our schools, is to put the right leadership ACTs into ACTion in order to create the right local work environments. These better local work environments, in turn, will create the right outcomes, such as reduced toxicity and more engagement, which are relevant to creating more efficient and effective improvements in student, staff and school outcomes.

### **References:**

Bennis, W. (2007). The Challenges of Leadership in the Modern World. *American Psychologist*, January Issue, 2-5.

Katz, S. (2008). A presentation at the Symposium: Building Networks for Learning. July 3, 2008 Sheraton Centre, Toronto.

Macey, W. H., & Schneider, B. (2008). The Meaning of Employee Engagement, *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 1, 3-30.

Meyer, J.P. (2008). The Science and Practice of Employee Engagement. Industrial / Organizational Section Invited Speaker Presentation, CPA Annual Conference, June 12-14, 2008. Halifax, NS, Canada

Mintzberg, H. (2006). The leadership debate with Henry Mintzberg: Community-ship is the answer. A Financial Times.com document retrieved from [http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/c917c904-6041-11db-a716-0000779e2340,dwp\\_uuid=8d70957c-6288-11db-8faa-0000779e2340.html](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/c917c904-6041-11db-a716-0000779e2340,dwp_uuid=8d70957c-6288-11db-8faa-0000779e2340.html)

Ontario Ministry of Education (2005). Shaping safer schools: A bullying prevention action plan. November, 2005.

Schaufeli, W.B., Bakker, A., & Salanova, M. (2006). The measurement of work engagement with a short questionnaire: A cross-national study. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 66, 701-716.

Wikipedia (2008). Quotation downloaded August 5, 2008 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Servant\\_leadership](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Servant_leadership)

Yardley, J.K., & Khalladi-Noka. M. (2008). The Perpetrator Effect of Workplace Incivility with Organizational Outcomes. A presentation at the APA / NIOSH Work, Stress, and Health 2008 Conference, Omni Shoreham Hotel, Washington, DC, March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2008.