

Strategic Workplace Health Promotion

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to outline key points on what is required by management to succeed with strategic workplace health promotion. In particular, the article focuses on management processes in relation to disseminating and embedding workplace strategies for health. The article concludes that strategic workplace health promotion is facilitated by strong and persevering management which is able to make visible how a systematic focus on health is of importance to the company's core activities and formulated strategic program areas.

Introduction

For many years now companies have been engaged in promoting employees health and well-being (Karanika-Murray & Weyman, 2013) – more and more through multicomponent initiatives that include a focus on both physical, mental and social health (Skovgaard & Berggren, 2012; Mellor & Webster, 2013). The workplace is well-established as an important setting for health in the 21st century (Kuoppala, Lamminpää & Husman, 2008; Goetzel et al., 2014). An increasing number of companies are, indeed, strengthening their focus on employees' health which, more and more, is seen as an important element in the combined efforts to attain the company's strategic aims (Zwetsloot & Scheppingen, 2010). Thus, many companies, both private and public, are in the market for knowledge about how to implement strategic health promotion in the best possible way – not least with a view to (cost) effectiveness and organizational sustainability (Pronk, 2009; Eriksson, , Axelsson & Axelsson, 2011). Many factors, of course, have the potential to contribute to company-initiated interventions that effectively promote occupational and habitual health and health behaviors. One factor, however, is many times emphasized: Management is a decisive determinant of both the extent and impact of the, oftentimes, profound organizational and wider contextual (e.g. related to workplace culture and incentive systems) changes required to realize company-driven health promotion as an active component of strategic development (Eriksson et. al, 2011; EU-OSHA, 2012a). Based on current literature on change management and selected parts of the body of knowledge on organizational workplace health, this article outline seven key points on what is required by management to succeed with implementing comprehensive workplace health promotion approaches (for information on additional sources informing this article, see *Text box*). In particular, the article focuses on the do's and don'ts in relation to disseminating and embedding workplace strategies for health.

Management Ensures Visibility and is Itself Visible

It is crucial to make the health promotion initiative visible, both in order to establish and maintain involvement at all levels of the company and to ensure continuity and consistency in the initiative overall.

Visibility is important in three ways (Koelen, Vaandrager & Wagemakers, A., 2008):

Firstly, visibility about the activities involved in the initiative. Here management can support by clearly sponsoring particular activities and ensuring promotion by, for example, having information material devised and by activating the work of Human Resource Management (HRM) (more about HRM aspects in following sections).

Secondly, visibility about the results of the initiative. The recommendation is to make use of both short and longer term goals to highlight the results of the initiative, whether effective or less effective. In this way involved parties are more likely to take note of and support the development of the company's health promotion initiative. Furthermore, management must lead attempts to focus the health promotion strategy on what works best and not submit to the temptation to set up initiatives simply because they are easy to manage or because they are in demand.

Thirdly, visibility as regards the specific qualities of the initiative for the parties involved and how they contribute. This type of visibility promotes positive commitment and increases the chance of continued motivation – not least when results can be linked to the company's core activities and formulated strategic program areas. Such a linkage is only possible if health promotion is systematically connected to the strategic aims of the company and regularly monitored. In fact, the level of ambition ought to be even higher: To ensure peak organizational impact, health promotion should be highlighted as an active component in the company's mission, vision and strategic planning.

Strategic Health Promotion is rooted in a Burning Passion

In relation to company-driven and strategically oriented health promotion, John P. Kotter's (1996) first step in organization development processes – *to establish a sense of urgency* – is primarily about generating necessity through *a sense of meaningfulness*. Creating meaning and understanding for such changes goes through clarifying the positive values that increased focus on health promotion has for the company and its employees. Put in another way, management has to generate a burning passion rather than a burning platform in a negative sense. In that respect it is important for management to understand what is needed in order to ensure employees' motivation for change (Burnes, 2004; Burnes, 2009; Kotter & Cohen, 2012). In this, management's most important contribution is to act as a molder of meaning, who makes it clear why and how health promotion is important at the company level, for the individual employee and other key stakeholders. A central message is that the company needs healthy and well-motivated staff that feels good, looks forward to going to work and are ready to take on the tasks they encounter and seek out.

Management Communication at all Levels

Communication is the most important interpersonal activity holding an organization together. Communication is the lifeblood of an organization and is therefore vital in any successful implementation of workplace health promotion (Bell & Smith, 2006). More specifically, effective integration of health promotion as part of the strategic aim of the workplace is conditional on a continual flow of information and dialogue between the parties involved. Good mutual knowledge sharing and communication are, for example, essential for shared and effective decision-making. All levels of management have an increased responsibility for ensuring that, from the start, a stable and well-functioning communication structure is in place, linking parties together and stimulating the sharing of information, ideas and experiences (communication in this respect also involves various kinds of visibility, see above). In addition, useable strategic application of company-driven health promotion requires managers who can both plan and decide; both generate enthusiasm and release creativity. In such contexts, management communication is a crucial competence. In general, excellence in communication is frequently highlighted as one of the most salient features of outstanding managers (Hargie, Dickson & Tourish, 2004; Müller and Turner, 2010).

Communication and Relevance

An important part of management communication is about creating attractive common narratives about health promotion that have a positive appeal for employees and make them want to sign up for the company's vision in this area. How, when and to what extent particular employees are ready and willing to do so is, of course, a personal matter, but in this respect an effective manager (and this applies to managers at all levels of the organization) is one who succeeds in showing how the initiative will a) play a part in and be measured against the company's overall performance and b) entails added value that makes sense at the individual level. Middle and first-level managers, for example, have a key role in the degree to which strategic health promotion makes a real impact decentrally (Barton & Abrosini, 2013). Ideally, these management levels make the overall initiative relevant for employees, by bringing health promotion into play in everyday (work) life. Middle and first-level managers are in the best possible position to do this when they receive visible support and concrete assistance from general management and/or other more highly placed management levels. Middle and first-level managers should be supported and equipped to lead processes in relation to strategic workplace health promotion. In-service training and competence development is cited as a key factor in relation to successful implementation of change programs (Michel, Todnem & Burnes, 2013). Likewise, it is essential to define the scope and obligations of change agents like middle and first-level managers (Gareis, 2010).

Long-Term Health Promotion Strategies

Deep and sustainable implementation of health promotion as an active part of a company's everyday practice requires that the foundation for change is not only maintained but is strengthened along the way. Here, too, it is crucial for management to stick to it – for example by frequently 'showing their colors' and demonstrating their belief that this is the right way to go and not least making it clear how working with health promotion adds value to the company's strategic ambitions and core activities. At the same time it is just as important for general management, alongside the other management levels, to make it clear to all employees that health promotion makes sense for them and their work efforts – even though they do not necessarily take much advantage of the company's offers and initiatives in this area. It is crucial, then, that awareness is constantly drawn towards the health promotion program. It is not enough that the program 'simply' is there (Helder & Hagel, 2009; Bordum, 2009).

Strategic Health Promotion does not Happen by Itself

The company's drive in the area of health promotion is conditional upon the parties involved having the resources necessary to get a grip on and carry out the process and its individual components. It is recommended that a task force or the like is established with the wherewithal, responsibility and opportunity to ensure progress. Strategic health promotion cannot be implemented as a small HRM project, not least because it requires flexibility in adapting to the company's overall development, strategic ambitions and tactical maneuvering. A health promotion strategy that is capable of being implemented has to be whole-hearted. Modest ambitions equal modest results (Marling & Skovgaard, 2014).

HRM as an Active Partner

To say that a trenchant strategic health promotion program has to be more than a HRM pet project is in no way to exclude HRM from having a central role in the process. Health-related advantages and positive developments such as greater enjoyment of work; reduced sick leave; fewer musculoskeletal problems; improved working relations and modes of communication are not achieved overnight (Skovgaard & Berggren, 2012). It is, therefore, crucial for management, employees and other central figures to articulate a common, shared health strategy and establish a set of ambitious benchmarks that are realistic to achieve within a foreseeable future (e.g. 1-2 years). Here it is important for HRM, as part of its central staff-related function, to work with the organization at all levels, for example by supporting middle and first-level managers in having maximum focus on and involvement in the execution of the company's health promotion initiative (Kossek, Kalliath & Kalliath, 2012). The area of health promotion is one that is best determined, organized and executed via cooperation among central and decentral branches of the company and with the involvement of both upper-, middle- and first-level management. Nowadays, HRM units play a central role in this respect as advisers, coordinators and communicators - bridging the company's various levels, functions and employee groups.

Also, HRM have the chance to take the lead as a driving force in achieving the ambitions many companies have today to integrate health promotion initiatives with strategies on working environment and corporate social responsibility (Monachino & Moreira, 2014). It is an important task to tackle – not least in order to counteract the tendency of workplace health promotion programs to disproportionately reach employees who are basically in good health and conscious of their own and others' health (EU-OSHA, 2012a; EU-OSHA, 2012b). There is a need to increase the number of those involved in companies' health promotion initiatives. Failure to make this happen will, most likely, mean that good initiatives may end up increasing the disparities in health that can be found at many workplaces.

The way Forward

Implementation of strategic health promotion of value for a company's 'bottom line' demands, then, strong and persevering management, who are able to make visible how a systematic focus on health is important in efforts to fulfil the organization's aim. Also, management must have the ability to lead a process of change, which involves amongst other things dealing with all the many organizational barriers that will challenge the realization of health promotion as a part of the company's overall strategy. In this, strategic workplace health promotion bears strong resemblance to other extensive organizational changes. It is all about the long, hard – and exciting – haul to encourage employees' interest in taking part in the process of change; to get middle and first-level managers on board; to ensure unequivocal sponsorship from general management for the process of change; and to embed the new ways of thinking in the company's continued development and practice. Success with this type of transitional tasks increases opportunities to reap the rewards of strategic health promotion that make sense and deliver benefits to individual employees, in the boardroom and among the company's wider circle of stakeholders.

Text box

In addition to selected literature and the authors' own experience in the field, the article is informed by one of the authors recently published PhD-thesis on workplace health promotion (Justesen, 2015) and an empirical study, conducted by Marling (2012), on the impact of management in connection with implementation of strategically embedded health promotion in a large Danish insurance company. Building on interview material and documentary studies, the latter study shows that management plays a key role in connection with formulating meaningful long term goals for the company's health promotion strategy (a process initiated by general management), developing effective action plans (handled by middle-level management) and supporting implementation processes that makes sense at the individual level (a key function at first-level management). This finding is backed by Justesen (2015) that describes upper- and middle-level management as two complementary systems that need to work together in developing and implementing strategies on workplace health promotion. Similar findings and conclusions are also found in other joint publications by the authors of this article (Marling and Skovgaard, 2014; Skovgaard and Justesen, 2014).

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