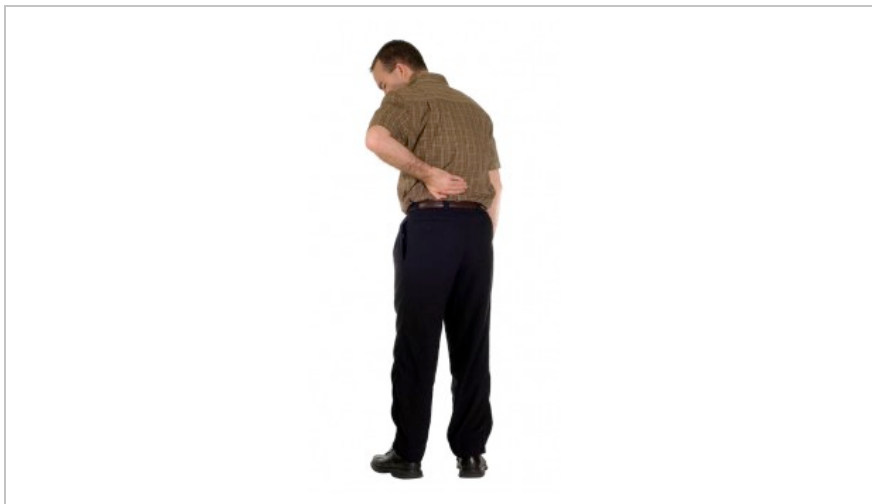### Disability Management Parallels Positive Psychology in Work Organizations

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All work organizations encounter problems with lost time secondary to employee injury or illness. To some degree, all work organizations must adopt and apply disability management methods. These methods represent the organization's strategies (or lack of the same) for preventing and reacting to lost time associated with employee injury or illness. Proactive Disability Management Programs (DMPs) have become viable and practical human-resource management strategies that predate many of the core principles of positive psychology.

Positive psychology is a new branch of behavioral science that attempts to illuminate the psychological factors that predict happiness, health, and well being. Proactive DMPs can parallel the tenets of positive psychology.

DMPs became viable workplace strategies after a series of economic studies in the early 1990s showed that disability costs in the workplace averaged 8% of company payrolls and that some organizations were spending as much as 31% of payroll on various consequences of employee disability.

DMPs target human factors in the workplace and are designed on psychological principles that govern human behavior, and where they are practiced, they bring significant economic gains to work organizations. For example, underlying assumptions of proactive disability management are that:

1. work is a central theme in the lives of individual employees;
2. following the onset of injury or illness, employees want to continue working;
3. if reasonably accommodated, they can and will return to work; and
4. returning to work is highly therapeutic.

People acquire disabilities through aging and a multitude of mishaps, diseases, and infections. As with most human problems, acquired disabilities have been viewed historically through the lens of a medical-disease model. Vocational rehabilitation has tended to follow a similar model, one that has paralleled the evolution of psychology, a science largely reactive and devoted to the treatment of dysfunctional conditions. Until recently, psychology and the human sciences in general have not taken into consideration the positive side of human development.

Over the last decade, positive psychology has captured the attention of human behavioral scientists from around the world. The early initiators of positive psychology have shown that the "good life" can be found in thriving communities that focus on positives such as good citizenship, responsibility, altruism, moderation, tolerance, and a strong work ethic. Positive psychologists have recognized that "the best things in life" can be found in meaningful work, and, by the same token, meaningful and "healthy" work can be experienced in organizations that are committed to positive psychological principles.

The Science of Positive Psychology and Disability Management:

In 1998, The American Psychological Association, under the urging of their president Martin Seligman, began to refocus its mission from exclusively defining and treating mental illness to one of finding preventive pathways to mental health and well being. This abrupt divergence from the traditional psychology model followed the lead of at least one other profession: Organizational Disability Management. That is, since the mid-1980s, exemplary DMPs in the workplace have evolved from allowing injured workers to collect disability payments to the development of the

"proactive" processes of keeping employees well, preventing injuries, and assisting impaired employees to transition back to work as quickly as feasible.

In the traditional medical-disease model of workplace disability, physicians made return-to-work decisions. This process was congruent with the mental illness/treatment approach applied in the pre-positive stage of psychology. In such models, psychiatrists and psychologists diagnosed and treated people with "mental illnesses." However, it had become clear to disability management specialists that impaired workers respond favorably to return-to-work efforts, especially if they perceive that they are valued and respected employees. In short, there seems to be the possibility that there is a good life following acquired occupational disability.

DMPs recognized that when an injury or illness does occur, the employer, not the physician, is in a better position to assist the impaired employee with a meaningful transition back to work. These early efforts demonstrated that absence prevention and productivity maintenance are realized through effective well being and safety programs. These realizations, in turn, have led to the preventive approach used in many, if not most, well-managed companies today.

Transformational Leadership:

Just as the development of positive psychology required visionary leadership, the evolution of how injured workers are treated in the workplace also required visionary leadership. In the early stages of engaging with injured workers, employers encouraged injured workers to go on workers' compensation (WC) and, in effect, leave the company. When employees took to the idea of not having to work again by staying on WC, the employer sought out third-party providers to find a comparable (pay level) job for the employee outside the company.

Early advocates for a better approach recognized that traditional rehabilitation services generally failed to develop active, equal, and valued partnerships with employees. Employers were urged to implement programs that valued employees by designing new, supportive approaches to the return-to-work process.

Positive psychology is based on strengthening assets for the purpose of preventing illness or dysfunction. It seeks to study how positive personality traits (character and values) in individuals are essential to building the desirable institutions of society, including strong families and viable workplaces. In the same manner, DMPs sought to develop and apply methods of prevention and early intervention as essential elements to keep employees safe and well and, if necessary, assist impaired employees in navigating effectively through the quagmire of the disability claims and medical process.

DMPs became a strategy designed to benefit employees. Employees who feel a sense of well being become more productive, tend to stay with the company, and are more likely to be loyal to the company's goals. State-of-the-art DMPs now advocate for prevention and early intervention through Safety and Wellness Programs, Employee Assistance Programs, Leadership Effectiveness, and Conflict Resolution support. Company leaders and disability managers now recognize that individual employees do not stumble onto happiness, well being, and productivity. Rather, they actively seek out work environments that enable opportunities to experience work-life balance, positive emotion, and "flow."

Work-Life Balance:

Originally employers recognized no connection between the employee's workplace responsibilities and anything else in their life. As work intensified in terms of the competitive nature of the work environment, employers were urged to balance their expectations of employees for loyalty and dedication with recognizing and taking into consideration external pressures (especially family pressure). Designing accommodations for that reality significantly improved worklife effectiveness and productivity. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) was promulgated, in part, on the notion that one's personal life has to have some degree of balance with job commitments.

Losing interest and becoming burned out are directly attributable to increased stress, and the condition is true for blue collar workers as well as management-level employees. In fact, the stress is heightened as both workplace and family pressures combine. Stress-derived injuries and subsequent disability claims continue to rise, and the workplace is identified as the crucible for these onsets.

Enlightened DMPs have helped employers to recognize the need to assist employees in how to better handle pressures. The gamut of strategies developed in state-of-the-art DMPs, such as well operated Employee Assistance Programs, the use of flexible hours, job modifications, job sharing, engaging employees in the decision-making processes that most affect them, and transition-to-work methods, is now part of the management procedure in most well-managed companies.

Emotional Contagion in Groups:

Emotional contagion has been shown to play a significant role in work-group dynamics. A better understanding of the conditions and concepts of emotional contagion can lead to greater insight into, and understanding of, employee workplace behavior.

The concept of emotional contagion is defined as the process in which a person or group influences the emotions or behavior of another person or group. Research confirms that people do not live on emotional islands but in groups, and that groups, as well as individuals, experience moods at work. These moods ripple out and, in the process, influence other group members' emotions. Thus, emotional contagion, through its direct and indirect influence on employee and work team emotions, judgments, and behaviors, can lead to subtle but significant ripple effects in groups and organizations. Whereas positive emotional contagion can enhance productivity, negative emotional contagion can reduce it.

Negative moods are highly infectious, and as a result, employers are learning, under the prodding of DMP innovators, to teach recognition and protection skills. Perhaps the most important skill to help contain contagion is teaching employees to achieve and maintain independence from group think. Awareness is certainly a start, but the key is active prevention and early intervention.

By the same token, Managerial Mediation and Conflict Resolution Skills training programs aspire to go beyond awareness alone. Unresolved conflict has been shown to be one of the most costly issues in the workplace. Research has shown that management-labor strife leads to losses through WC and long-term disability. There are now specific training programs for managers in mediation methods and conflict resolution. These training programs

have proved to be highly cost effective. Similarly, Leadership Effectiveness Training includes skill development in interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, and problem solving, all of which make for more effective workplace management.

Flow:

If employers could choose one attribute they would want in their employees, it would certainly be motivation. Individuals who are highly motivated generally experience satisfaction at work through an optimal mental state called "flow." Flow is what distinguishes a constantly productive employee from one significantly less productive. The underlying premise is that a person who is fully engaged in what they are doing is energized by it. This total immersion in the activity (e.g., the work process) reveals that one can experience high levels of satisfaction in challenging tasks that match skills.

Flow can be induced. Training methods include helping employees to:

set clear goals,

concentrate and focus,

seek and analyze feedback, and

control the activity.

Job Modification/Job Accommodation

In a well-established program, job modification, job accommodation, and job sharing can facilitate an injured employee's return to work. These approaches are tools of what is called a Transition-to-Work process. Rather than assign an injured employee to a light-duty job (translated as a meaningless, pay-for-no-work approach), transition methods have the returning employee engaged in real work but for shorter time spans. The returnee is reintroduced to the job through incremental stages. Jobs can be modified in terms of their physical demands, time allocation, environmental requirements, supervision, and countless other ways that are a function of employer-employee joint (creative) problem solving.

Job modification is the process of subtracting from, or adding to, a job description while maintaining only the essential functions (a primary concept of the Americans with Disabilities Act) of the job. Job modification might include eliminating unessential lifting, changing hours, relocating a job within a particular work environment, or changing the job assignment in a manner that results in both employer satisfaction and employee success. Job accommodation is a specific method advanced by the collaborative effort between employer and employee to modify work or to accommodate the needs of an impaired employee so that the essential functions of the job may be carried out to the mutual satisfaction of both employer and employee.

The U.S. Department of Labor comments, "The process for making such accommodations is no different in principle than implementing workplace procedures designed to build productive work environments. As with all such procedures, open lines of communication and clearly defined steps help to facilitate the process and achieve positive outcomes for both employers and employees."

Conclusions

As disability managers and forward-thinking business leaders hear about the evolving theories of positive psychology, they will be encouraged. Positive psychology research parallels disability management development and proves that human beings have specific pathways to well being, happiness, and productivity open to them. These pathways are available to employers and employees in proactive work organizations that apply positive human capital strategies designed to keep people at work, engaged, creative, and too satisfied with their jobs to remain disability claimants.

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