

Creating a Hardy Work Environment: Can Organizational Policies Help?

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Abstract

The concept of hardiness has consistently proven to be a method of improving overall coping and decreasing stress. High hardy organizations will attract and retain a higher proportion of hardy individuals. Rural health leaders are challenged to work toward development of institutional policies that will boost and sustain hardiness among staff. Rewards of improved patient and staff satisfaction and decreased turnover rates will likely result.

Key words: hardiness, health care, organizational policy, rural nursing, stress reduction.

Introduction

Health care is facing the most severe personnel shortage in history not only in nursing, but also among allied health workers. As both urban and rural areas struggle with increasing demand for services, rural areas traditionally take the hardest hits with higher percentages of at-risk populations and fewer numbers of available personnel to fill job vacancies (Eldridge & Judkins, 2003). Now, more than ever, retention of quality staff is the key to meeting institutional staffing needs while attempting to maintain financial viability. Significant impact related to this key issue stems from stress-induced employee problems. American organizations are estimated to experience stress related losses from \$4.2 to \$60 billion a year due to absenteeism, reduced productivity, and direct and indirect medical expenses (Benton, 2000). In effect, when stress and burnout are experienced, staff miss more days from work and are less productive (Sortet & Banks, 1996). Consequently, assisting employees to deal with issues such as stress and burnout (emotional exhaustion) has enormous benefits to organizations as costs are reduced and quality of work life is improved.

One major area of expense associated with

stress involves high turnover rates. Estimates of turnover costs range from \$30,000 to \$60,000 per staff member depending on need and job position. Costs include recruitment and orientation of new staff, loss of experienced staff, and periods of short staffing accompanied by overtime or use of temporary staff (McConnell, 1999; Bledgen, Vaughn, & Goode, 2001).

In searching for opportunities to diminish the negative effects of stress, hardiness emerges as a strong preference. Hardiness has been found to not only reduce stress, but also help in developing coping skills that benefit both individuals and organizations. In health care, links have been found between hardiness and stress and burnout (Fusco, 1994; McCranie, Lambert, & Lambert, 1987; Rowe, 1998), job satisfaction (Little, 1995; Tierney &

Lavelle, 1997), and issues related to retention, turnover, and absenteeism (Martin, 1995; Noble, 1993). High hardy staff nurses have been found to be more resistant to stress, strain, and burnout (Rich & Rich, 1987; Collins, 1996; Simoni & Paterson, 1997). Among nurse

managers, high hardiness was linked to lower levels stress and higher problem-solving coping skills (Judkins, 2001). In fact, some nurses may be *tougher* than others with hardiness being the key to preventing emotional exhaustion and turning stressful events into meaningful challenges (Bryant, 1994).

So, you ask, "How do health care agencies enhance hardiness among employees and reap untold benefits to the organization?" The answer is the focus as we address how organizational policies can help produce a high hard work force, and help maintain a work environment that sustains high hardiness.

Background

Introduced in 1979 by Kobasa, hardiness has emerged as a positive mediating variable in the stress-coping response. Kobasa found that male executives with higher levels of hardiness (defined as commitment, control and challenge) experienced less stress and physical illness, were more engaged, and felt more in control over their work

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environment. Later, Kobasa, Maddi, and Kahn (1982) determined that hardiness protects against stress in two ways: by altering perceptions of stress and by mobilizing effective coping strategies. Hardy individuals have been found to be goal-oriented people approaching life with interest and excitement, seeing themselves as active determinants of the consequences of change (Kobasa, 1979; Rowe, 1999). The three elements of hardiness bear description:

Commitment

Commitment is the tendency to be involved in life's events. Committed individuals are invested in themselves and their relationship to the social context; they will confront and engage others while creating a nurturing environment. Committed persons do not give up easily under pressure and their relationships involved proactive behavior rather than passivity or avoidance (Kobasa et al., 1982). Among RNs, organizational commitment is highly related to job satisfaction (McNeese-Smith, 1995). Thus, administrators seeking organizational commitment could benefit from high hardy individuals especially in the context of recruitment and retention of high quality staff.

Control

Control is the propensity to feel that one is in control of the situation, and actions and consequences are the result of individual responses. Control enhances stress resistance perceptually by increasing the likelihood that an event will be experienced as a result of one's actions. This notion implies a perception of having influence through the exercise of imagination, knowledge, skill, and choice (Kobasa et al., 1982). Control appears responsible for the development of broad and varied responses to stress, which can be drawn upon even in the most threatening of circumstances (Bartone, Ursano, Wright, & Ingraham, 1989). Such responses to stress may steer individuals through the pitfalls of organizational life in a manner conducive to both the health of the organization and the individual (Turnipseed, 1999). By possessing control, individuals bring stability and hope to organizations.

Challenge

Challenge is a belief that change rather than stability is the norm. Individuals high in challenge will be stimulated by change and react with openness, flexibility, and innovation (Turnipseed, 1999). Challenge will lead to attempts to transform one's self and thereby grown, rather than conserve and protect the former existence (Kobasa et al., 1982). Aversion to change can be a real problem

for organizations as the political system continues to reform the health care economy (Turnipseed, 1994). This problem may be avoided as high challenge members are energized by change and thus given an advantage to high hardy organizations.

Hardiness and Organizational Policies

Deliberate intentions by leaders/managers are the only way for staff to attain high levels of hardiness. Since various studies have supported hardiness as a contributing factor in reducing emotional exhaustion and in buffering the effects of stress (Maddi, 1999; Simoni & Paterson, 1997; Turnipseed, 1999), instituting agency policies is a first step in establishing an effective, high-hardy work environment. Policies empower employees to act and give teeth to the importance of the actions that must follow. One effective step is to offer educational opportunities that help to improve individual hardiness. As an example, Judkins and Ingram (2002) reported an increase in hardiness scores following stress-coping, hardiness-promoting activities. Maddi (1987), Rowe (1999), and Tierney and Lavelle (1997) found similar results. However, to sustain high hardiness scores reinforcement over a longer period of time is required (Maddi, 1987; Rowe, 1999). Thus, a policy of ongoing hardiness training should be established as part of staff development. Hardiness training among all employees can create a work environment that will attract and retain staff. This action may have a significant financial impact on the organization as job satisfaction and retention increase, and turnover rates decrease. Larrabee and colleagues (2003) assert that, among nurses, control of practice and empowerment were strong predictors of job satisfaction and that high hardy nurses felt more empowerment. McNeese-Smith (1995) found that enabling staff to act and challenge processes were significant predictors of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. As staff feel more in control and possess a strong sense of commitment, unexpected vacancies may be reduced along with the need to use premium staff or overtime. Using this approach can create a win-win for both patients and agencies as continuity increases while costs diminish.

Promoting control can take the form of providing an environment where staff, especially nurses, feel a sense of influence over their practice. A self-scheduling policy would permit control of work and off time. Policies allowing nurses to practice to the extent of their skills and abilities are

keenly encouraged. Collaborative practice committees should be established whereby physicians and nurses work together to establish standards of care that incorporate nursing judgment and that determine what interventions can be implemented and when. Larrabee and colleagues (2003) suggest that collaboration with physicians and managers is a significant contributor to highly satisfied RNs in the work force.

Another way of increasing control is to provide an open administrative communication system that shares information and requests input. As control is exercised, it will continue to grow in other areas of practice and decision-making. Upenieks (2003) affirms that a work environment that supports an autonomous climate, shared governance, and participatory management upholds nursing satisfaction. As previously emphasized, high satisfaction translates to decreased turnover and reduced agency costs once again benefiting all stakeholders.

Commitment is built by providing support and building trusting relationships. By encouraging personal involvement in daily organizational life, commitment by staff becomes a natural outgrowth. Organizational leaders can increase commitment by being a person rather than a suit. By sharing personal successes and failures with protégés, administrators can mentor growth and lead by example. This will translate to managers who can mentor commitment in staff. Policies that increase individual self-esteem through encouraging group involvement and support can also augment commitment, as can establishing interdepartmental mentor models that pair new managers with seasoned managers in other departments. Training sessions for all managers in the same venue may also increase group cohesiveness and strengthen interdepartmental and organizational relationships.

Turning obstacles into opportunities is the essence of challenge. Change is the only constant in health care today. Capitalize on that reality. If given all the facts, staff will often respond rather than react. Develop policies that promote participation in change such as encouraging staff to participate on key committees within the organization. Whenever possible provide information in advance of a change(s) and elicit potential methods of incorporating the change into practice. Treat change as evolution rather than negative intrusion and involve as many staff as possible. Develop policies that encourage and reward risk-taking behaviors rather than risk-avoidance. Most health care agencies only pay lip service to this approach. When risk-taking behavior fails to produce the desired results, blame placing and punishment often follow. For the risk-taker,

this can result in stepping back from seeking or contributing creative solutions. Agency leadership must be willing to allow challenges to the status quo if staff are to become active, vital members of the organization.

Summary

After 20 years of theory, research, and practice, hardiness has consistently proven to be a method of decreasing stress and improving overall coping (Maddi, 2002). Application of hardiness to health care workers provides sound direction in developing and maintaining healthy environments for those who lead (Pappas, 1995). Further, as organizations strive to become hardy, they will attract and retain a higher proportion of hardy individuals (Maddi, 2002). Hardiness promoting policies will enhance outcomes such as patient and staff satisfaction and likely diminish turnover rates. Many organizations pay consultants enormous fees to change the culture. By developing a high-hardy environment, administrators can reap the same benefits at a fraction of the cost. Armed with this information, organizational leaders should focus on developing institutional policies that will boost and sustain hardiness among staff. The rewards will be immeasurable.

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