

Rethinking Good Work

Developing sustainable employees and workplaces.

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7/31/2009
Report# 0903

The Project for Wellness and Work-Life

<http://www.asu.edu/clas/communication/about/wellness/>

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Authors would like to thank Sarah Riforgiate for formatting, editing and providing suggestions on this article and Audrey Iffert for providing comments and editing on earlier drafts, as well.

The Project for Wellness and Work-Life (PWWL) is a consortium of scholars who examine the intersections of work, domestic life, and wellness. Research foci include workplace bullying, emotion labor, burnout, conflict, gender and work-life negotiation. PWWL holds a use-inspired research approach, developing projects that increase theoretical knowledge while simultaneously impacting policy and improving the everyday lives of women and men. PWWL is a strategic initiative of The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. For more information, please visit our website: www.asu.edu/clas/communication/about/wellness/. For correspondence regarding this article please contact yvonne.montoya@asu.edu

Executive Summary

Sustainability is rapidly becoming a household word. Business organizations, schools, and families are adopting "green" policies and practices. Even the largest economic stimulus package approved in the U.S. has called for adding green jobs. While recycling, converting light bulbs, and developing renewable energy are all important, it is time managers think about the ways in which their employees are sustainable over the long haul, can expend less energy and still do a great job, and make sure there are enough reserves to last into old age.

Studies suggest that employees experience high levels of stress and burnout at work (Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Tracy, 2008). What happens if our organizations and homes are sustainable, but the people within those places are not? Long work hours, constant accessibility via technological devices like cell phones, and the desire to fulfill an outdated stereotype of a good employee contribute to this stress and burnout.

Employees are indoctrinated with tips and rules for how to succeed at work, be great employees and climb the ladders of success. However, few of these suggestions make the long-term sustainability of the employee the central focus. Instead, these strategies incorporate old-fashioned practices that are managerially focused and often less efficient than newer, more flexible approaches. We are currently at an economic crossroads in the U.S. and employers have the opportunity to build sustainable work forces or exploit employees given the dire need for workers to have employment. The choice to develop and sustain employees now will have benefits in the future. These benefits have the potential to benefit different types of employees and organizations.

The U.S. depends upon the labor of people from a variety of employment sectors. Yet, the focus of most work-life or wellness programs is directed toward professional employees and women. This country will not be successful if only white-collar professionals achieve work place success, enlightenment, or attention. Therefore, the ideas set forth in this paper apply to multiple professions from the stay at home mom, to the executive manager or construction worker.

This paper provides: 1) An overview of sustainability and its relationship to the individual employee; 2) Discussion of what constitutes a good employee; 3) Ways to reframe and connect a good employee and a sustainable employee; and 4) Practical suggestions for helping employees and administrators develop sustainable selves.

Background

Sustainability has been defined in a number of ways. However, one of the most widely used definitions of sustainable development comes from the Brundtland Commission (1987). They suggest that a goal of sustainable development is ". . . to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (p. 43). As expected, many discussions about sustainability are largely focused on preserving the environment and natural resources. However, even the above definition can translate to employees.

We may not always be conscientious about the ways our work habits influence future generations.

In order to provide our basic necessities, contribute to society, and sustain communities, most people do some type of work. Many adults and teens work for pay in either a temporary job or long term occupation. However, not all work is paid (e.g. caring for one's own children, household chores, and volunteer work), yet still requires skills, time, effort and energy. While this work is certainly necessary to meet the needs we face in the present, we may not always be conscientious about the ways our work habits influence future generations.

Rather than project into the future, it is easier to think back and reflect upon the work habits, routines, and practices that our parents, guardians, or grandparents adopted that still affect us. People of these generations are often retired or in many instances CEOs, foremen, directors, and supervisors in most present day organizations. Mentors or supervisors who were working during the Industrial Revolution taught a large number of these individuals.

During the Industrial Revolution, organizational leaders were trying to figure out how best to manage organizations to maximize profits and efficiency. Managers adopted practices based on productivity-based theories. For example, classical management (Fayol, 1949) focused on planning, organizing, command, coordination and control in order to increase production. Bureaucratic principles (Weber, 1946, 1947) encouraged a focus on rules, hierarchies and centralized power. In addition, scientific management (Taylor, 1911) concentrated on efficiency with systematic designs detailing how managers should select, train, and manage employees for greater productivity. It was during this time that managers were constantly watching over employees, setting quotas, and in many ways micro-managing their labor force.

As managerial practices and expectations of workers became more programmatic, employees were placed into organizations like machines and expected to keep up with production or be replaced. Some occupations lacked unionization. Though, even in unionized industries employers only had to adhere to specific laws, making it difficult for employees to change production oriented work environments. It's not surprising that the workers began to stick to stringent rules and practices in order to keep their jobs. It was during the Industrial Revolution that an outline for what constitutes a good employee was developed.

Over time this outline was broadened and employees began to receive messages not only from their direct supervisors, but from television, a variety of magazines, popular press books, life coaches, friends, peers, and so on, about what it takes to stand out at work or be a good employee. Many employees have tried to meet these criteria in order to stand out.

Workers have learned that enacting certain behaviors can result in being categorized as a good employee. Activities such as putting in long hours, coming in early and leaving late, not calling in sick (even when you are sick), carrying heavy materials on one's back to save time rather than using dollies or machinery, taking on extra tasks just because they need to be finished, having an unreasonably full calendar, being accessible even when technically on vacation or off the clock, not complaining about the heat or cold when working outside, picking up slack for co-workers, and prioritizing the job over family, friends, hobbies, or volunteer service are all encouraged and valued by the employer.

What it means to be a good employee not only involves what an employee does, but also makes assumptions about who is able to perform those tasks.

This somewhat arbitrary outline for what constitutes a good employee has become so indoctrinated into our society that employees often police themselves and their co-workers. Self-regulation and/or regulation of one's peers, also known as concertive control (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985), work to an organization's advantage, but are not necessarily in the best interest of employees. In addition, the ways people enact what it means to be a good employee not only involves what an employee does, but also makes assumptions about who is able to perform those tasks.

Simply examining some of the tasks mentioned above helps demonstrate what we mean by "who" can qualify as a good employee. For example, lifting heavy things and

doing manual labor implies a type of physical ability that not everyone has. Having the ability to cope with tough weather, bending, lifting, or sitting for long hours at a desk can decline with age. Additionally, being able to prioritize work is not always possible for parents or people who care for elderly parents or relatives. Yet, when work takes precedence, individuals may experience guilt or other emotions as a result of not prioritizing their families. Furthermore, coming in early and leaving late can be difficult for those who rely on public transportation.

As seen in the above examples, embedded within the activities of "good workers" are physical, mental and emotional constraints or abilities. These constraints and abilities have allowed some employees to rise to higher ranks while others remain marginalized or leave the organization after working only short periods of time.

Adopting a sustainable framework is one way to help restructure what constitutes a good employee and shift the focus to developing practices that encourage long-term development.

The above discussion regarding how the concept of a "good worker" has been constructed is not an attempt to argue that these qualities are all bad. Instead, it is important to understand that the ways in which we conceptualize and transfer the identity of a good worker to others and ourselves might make employee sustainability difficult. Therefore, adopting a sustainable framework is one way to help restructure what constitutes a good employee and shift the focus to developing practices that encourage long-term development.

Unfortunately there are currently millions of unemployed Americans. High unemployment rates allow employers to maintain even more power than usual. Many people who are laid off or terminated seek any type of employment available. As a result, the economic crisis in the U.S. has created an environment in which highly skilled workers with years of experience are forced into lower paying jobs, reduced hours of employment, and/or mandatory unpaid days off. Workers in desperate situations may adhere to incredibly high expectations, constant change, low wages, and mandates to work any shift, pick up the slack for colleagues who were terminated, or accept fewer benefits such as health insurance or company contributions to employee retirement accounts.

While organizations reap the benefits of having overqualified workers, and those who are afraid to lose their jobs, this power can also have under emphasized costs. These costs include low employee morale, little company loyalty, poor customer service, and negative

organizational climate. In situations where workers are expected to adhere to multiple directives and high standards, with few benefits and low pay, employees will likely feel exploited. This exploitation may help organizations earn short-term gains, but at long-term negative costs.

Organizations that exploit workers in the short-term may experience high turnover in which they not only lose employees, but institutional knowledge.

If managers are interested in developing a work force that will be energetic, productive, and loyal then it is important to think about long-term solutions. The economy will turn around and the organizations that treat their employees well will likely prosper. Whereas, many of the organizations that exploit workers in the short-term may experience high turnover in which they not only lose employees, but institutional knowledge.

One way to manage and prepare for the turn around is to adopt sustainable principles for employees. Within their vision statement, the President's Council on Sustainable Development (1996) note:

A sustainable United States will have a growing economy that provides equitable opportunities for satisfying livelihoods and a safe, healthy, high quality of life for current and future generations. Our nation will protect its environment, its natural resource base, and the functions and viability of natural systems on which all life depends. (Definition & vision statement section, para. 1).

If we are to work toward equitable opportunities that provide safe, healthy, and high quality lives for future generations and ourselves then we must also protect the employees and families on whom the overall system depends.

Sustainability is a large and ever growing topic with a multitude of suggestions for developing a sustainable society. In fact, there are several guidelines available for how to work toward developing sustainable homes, organizations and communities (e.g. Wingspread Principles, The Hannover Principles, The Natural Step Principles, The Earth Charter Benchmark Draft, The Precautionary Principle, National Park Service's Principles for Sustainable Design, etc.).

While all of the sets of principles offer different insights and contributions, we specifically focus on adapting The Hannover Principles (McDonough & Partners, 1992).

These principles are designed to be a way of thinking rather than a set of practices.

Therefore, the principles are best applied if one thinks about them when attempting any action and believes that following these principles in a community will lead to reaching more long-term goals. As such, we adapt these principles into a new set of principles in order to help people think about individual interactions in the workplace and how these thought processes might impact organizations and our identities as good workers.

These principles are designed to be a way of thinking rather than a set of practices.

Sustainable Employee Principles

It is unreasonable to think that employees can just leave parts of themselves at the door when they come to work. People are not simply accountants, farmers, taxi cab drivers or account representatives. Instead employees often have other roles such as spouse, parent, child, sibling, friend, and so on. Additionally, we have various social identities that impact our interpersonal and group interactions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These identities can include things such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, height, weight, education level, etc. All of these factors contribute to our knowledge bases and levels of understanding regarding how to make sense of things, problem solve, and communicate appropriately. Therefore, expecting employees to minimize all other roles and identities outside of being an employee or worker is not really possible, nor should it be expected.

Employees have other roles and various social identities that impact daily interactions at work and in their communities.

Recognizing employees' multiple responsibilities within and outside of the organization and acknowledging how those different roles can sometimes conflict or inform one another will provide employees with a more holistic identity. Embracing the idea that each organizational member has the right and responsibility to develop his/her own priorities and coexist as a multi-faceted person can lead to policies, regulations, and actions that improve the lives of employees.

<p align="center">Hannover Principles (McDonough & Partners, 1992, p. 5) Abridged version detailed below.</p>	<p align="center">Sustainable Employee Principles (Montoya, 2009)</p>
<p>Insist on rights of humanity and nature to co-exist in a healthy, supportive, diverse and sustainable condition.</p>	<p>Each person in the organization has the right and responsibility to develop his/her priorities and co-exist as an employee, parent, dancer . . .</p>
<p>Recognize interdependence.</p>	<p>Value and reward interdependence and collaboration.</p>
<p>Respect relationships between spirit and matter. Consider all aspects of human settlement including community, dwelling, industry and trade in terms of existing and evolving connections between spiritual and material consciousness.</p>	<p>Connect and willingly listen to different parts of one's mind, body, and soul in an effort to engage in new types of decision making.</p>
<p>Accept responsibility for the consequences of design decisions upon human well-being, the viability of natural systems and their right to co-exist.</p>	<p>Recognize where one has privilege based on his/her own social identities and work to not oppress others.</p>
<p>Create safe objects of long-term value. Do not burden future generations with requirements for maintenance or vigilant administration of potential danger due to the careless creation of products, processes or standards.</p>	<p>Focus on long-term outcomes as well as consequences to the self, organization, and community.</p>
<p>Eliminate the concept of waste. Evaluate and optimize the full life-cycle of products and processes, to approach the state of natural systems, in which there is no waste.</p>	<p>Do not waste (or at least conserve) time, energy, or resources.</p>
<p>Rely on natural energy flows.</p>	<p>Acknowledge sources of inspiration, motivation and positive practices.</p>
<p>Understand the limitations of design.</p>	<p>Understand one's own and others' limitations in an effort to collaborate.</p>
<p>Seek constant improvement by the sharing of knowledge.</p>	<p>Good communication will provide knowledge, success, support, and understanding.</p>

Interdependence is key to developing a sustainable workforce. It is important for employees in all sectors of the work force to understand how their jobs and activities play an important role in the overall organizational mission. Additionally, organizations can do a better job of valuing and rewarding interdependence and collaboration over individualism. Many reward structures, promotions, and praise are based on individual versus group accomplishments. As a result workplaces have become ever more competitive with some workers retaining information that should be shared so as to have an edge up on other colleagues. If collaboration and interdependence are rewarded employees may be more likely to share information, work together, and recognize that their actions (good and bad) have an impact on others.

Recognizing and being responsive to other sources of knowledge is important.

We often privilege the mind over other aspects of our being. When people pay more attention to their mind over their conscience, gut, or heart so to speak, decisions can be made that otherwise would not. Employees are often faced with situations in which they are expected to make ethical decisions, develop policies that impact others' lives, and make budgetary decisions that benefit some people and penalize others. Certainly the mind is not something that should be wasted or trivialized, but recognizing and being responsive to other sources of knowledge or intuition is also important (S. A. De la Garza, personal communication, March 24, 2008).

Privilege comes in many shapes, sizes and forms. Recognizing when we have privilege whether it comes from social class, education, race, language or years of service is a first step in understanding how it positions us in various organizations. While characteristics or identities in one situation might bring about privilege, in other situations those same qualities might be derogatory. For example, a male executive might experience gender privilege, but if that same man entered the nursing profession he could be discriminated against.

Although some people might want to retain rather than relinquish privilege, in the long term, power or privilege that goes uncensored can negatively impact the whole. It does not matter if some countries do not pollute, but instead recycle and cultivate the land and other natural resources. Other privileged countries that continue to emit high levels of pollution, waste natural resources, and refuse to adopt more sustainable policies will damage the global environment and utilize more resources than necessary. In the workplace employees

can reflect on spaces where they are privileged or part of the in-group and determine how they could refrain from oppressing others. Not only will this make people accountable and cognizant of the consequences of their actions, but also others will have the opportunity to grow.

For better or worse in the U.S. we have become an instant gratification society. We like pills that work fast, food we can pick up without getting out of our cars, news on the Internet and overnight delivery of almost anything. While obtaining things as quickly as one wants has benefits, it also has many downsides. Instant gratification can encourage people to focus on short-term gains rather than long-term consequences. Many people take pills for heart disease and diabetes rather than trying to control their diets and exercise, some executives fix company numbers to show high quarterly profits and earn bonuses without paying attention to the overall financial picture, and in some organizations older workers get pushed out in an effort to save money without a focus on the years of experience and loads of knowledge these workers have to share.

If managers and employees focus on long-term gains as well as potential repercussions, organizations can remain viable for years.

While in the short term there are benefits to these actions the long-term consequences outweigh the benefits. If managers and employees focus on long-term gains as well as potential repercussions, organizations can remain viable for years. If employees are rewarded for a long-term consciousness they will be more likely to enact one.

In order to put in face time and keep up the good worker ideal many employees and managers waste hours and hours of time, energy and resources. Employees spend huge quantities of time commuting, filtering through emails, redoing projects, and spending time on tasks that are unnecessary just to fill hours. In other cases employees work so many hours they do not have time or energy left to invest in other areas of their lives. If employers work with employees to evaluate their current positions and determine if there are ways to reduce wasted time, energy or resources and then allow those employees to use that time for personal and professional development they will be more likely to fully engage in their work when needed.

In organizations, managers and employees often focus on the negative. Employees get feedback when they need to improve rather than when they do a great job. People in different work places often gossip about co-workers or managers, spread rumors about the

fate of the company, talk about low pay, and complain about the parts of their job that they hate. While it is important to have an outlet for both frustrating and positive aspects of the job, most employees can do a better job of recalling the positive aspects of their employment. Additionally, identifying who and what inspires, motivates or encourages you can provide a boost when needed. Moreover, if employees are continually praised for what they do well and given ideas or best practices on how to improve the overall quality of the work will likely reflect this positive energy.

Despite the best intentions, practices, and ideas there are limitations to what can be done at any given time. No one is perfect and it can be difficult to complete every job

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and activity without there being kinks in the plan. Recognizing that everyone and nearly every plan or blue print has limitations can free people from obsessing over perfection, as well as allow for creativity and skilled problem solving addressing the limitations. Additionally, knowing and acknowledging one's own limitations allows for interdependence to thrive. Rather than being penalized for not knowing how to do something employees can learn from one another and conserve time and energy trying to learn and do a task at the same time.

Central to all of the sustainable employee principles is communication. If employees are unable to communicate with one another, managers, family members, friends, and community members, very little will get done. On the flip side, good communication can lead to better relationships, outcomes, consequences and understanding. Employees should not discount the impacts of non-verbal communication, face-to-face communication, as well as all types of communication via technology and in print.

Above we provided a few suggestions on ways of thinking that might guide your organizational decisions, interactions and practices. Below we offer some practical suggestions on helping employees develop a sustainable work identity.

Six Ways to Help Employees Develop a Sustainable Work Identity

While organizational members, media outlets, family members, etc. must work to help change the concept of what makes a good employee to include a more sustainable outlook,

managers can lead the fight. There is no one correct solution or approach. The tips listed below focus on how you can create a sustainable work force, however, it is important to note that one of the best ways to elicit participation is to model the behaviors discussed. We encourage you to treat this list as a living document that changes and grows with you and the world around you.

1) COMMUNICATE GOALS

It is not only important that you know your goals, but you need to tell others what your goals are. For example, if your goal is to reduce the amount of energy you use in your home, but no one else knows that goal; it might be difficult to successfully save energy. Others might leave lights on without thinking or not understand why you constantly go through the house turning off lights or unplugging unused appliances. However, if you tell others about your goal and why it is important to you, they have the opportunity to make adjustments that help you.

Similarly, if an employee's goal is to get promoted, finish all of his work by 3:00 pm so he can make his child's basketball game, or spend less time filtering through email

Tips

- ❖ Repeat & discuss your goals with others to help stay focused.
- ❖ Determine how you like people to communicate with you and share that information (i.e. face-to-face; email; through assistants).

messages he should communicate those goals. There is no guarantee that others' goals will be the same as his, but if the entire crew or department is working toward sustaining a positive and supportive work environment people might be more willing to make an effort to help him reach his goals. For example, a manager might keep an eye out for opportunities to promote him, a co-worker might include everything in one email rather than send four separate ones, and an office mate could remind him to leave if he is still working at 3:15 pm.

Additionally, it is important to understand that people have different communication styles. Knowing your own style as well as those of your co-workers and employees can help you develop effective communication strategies.

2) MAKE HEALTH A PRIORITY

Obesity, substance abuse, injury, high levels of stress, and burnout continue to plague the American worker. While these conditions can result from multiple causes, the way our society socializes us to be “good workers” is among the perpetrators. We allow medical personnel, fire fighters, truckers and others to work back-to-back shifts with no sleep. We

encourage CEOs, construction workers, and graduate students to pull all-nighters to get a job done regardless of whether the only food available during late hours is unhealthy take-

out or vending machine spoils. We permit, and in some instances encourage, employees to go to work ill and often praise their commitment.

Tips

- ❖ Encourage others to take advantage of employee wellness programs or ask human resources personnel to set up on site health fairs.
- ❖ Stay home when you are sick & praise employees who do the same!

Unless we begin to recognize that a sustainable/good employee is a well-rested, well-fueled, un-injured employee who is not burnt out, we will continue to have mal-practice lawsuits, avoidable accidents on the highway, deaths due to heart attack and stroke, and entire departments that develop the flu because no one stays home when they are sick.

3) SUPPORT OTHERS & ACCEPT SUPPORT

It is one thing to communicate goals, but if no one supports your goals it can be difficult to achieve them. One way to garner support is to give support. Social support has been shown to reduce stress, burnout (Ray & Miller, 1991) and loneliness (Wright, 2005). Sustainable employees allow themselves and encourage others to sleep, eat well, express emotions, dress according to their own style, have a variety of hobbies and be concerned with long-term wellness. Sustainable employees have others to depend on (managers, co-workers, friends, family members, temporary workers, members of other organizations) to meet the goals of the organizations.

Tip

- ❖ Even when your employees' priorities are different from your own encourage them to pursue their goals.
- ❖ Ask for support or accept support when offered.

Additionally, don't be afraid to ask for support or accept it when offered. Too many times we decline support so that we appear self-sufficient or will not owe anyone future favors. This mind set does not help us develop personal sustainability or help others become sustainable. Instead of refusing help, accept support when needed, knowing that you help others and work on a daily basis to create a positive supportive environment. That way you will not feel indebted if someone covers for you. If we develop actions with others, rather than just keeping ourselves in mind, we can become part of a greater system of support.

4) KNOW YOUR LIMITATIONS

Are you able to recognize when you are at a breaking point? Do your body and mind ever feel weak and overburdened, but you keep on typing or shoveling? In practical terms we can't all just take breaks, long walks, or naps in the middle of our workdays. However, if we continue to ignore our thoughts, feelings and physical responses we will begin to disintegrate. Acknowledging and dealing with aspects of ourselves that need healing can help lead to greater creativity and freedom (De la Garza, 2004).

Al Gore noted in the documentary film An Inconvenient Truth (David, et. al, 2006) the ways in which neglect for our environment, failure to reduce consumption of natural resources, and global warming have impacted and will continue to impact our society. If U.S. workers continue to neglect our workplaces, the individuals and lives of the people within those institutions, and the future needs of our society, we too will be in crisis. Just as we cannot pick up and simply move to another planet we cannot make up for lost years, permanent injuries, or unrealized dreams, nor can we re-parent grown children. Instead we have to make changes now and rethink what it means to be a good employee.

5) CULTIVATE ALL EMPLOYEES

In some ways it is easy to think about the ways in which hard-working and knowledgeable employees should be rewarded and why it is important to sustain them over the long haul. However, not every employee does a great job, contributes to a positive work environment or is particularly responsible. In some cases adopting sustainable employee principles might seem like a way to reward poor workers and give them even more freedom to take advantage of their employer. While there are legitimate concerns, it is not advisable to refrain from developing workplace policies or procedures that would benefit the majority of employees based on a few poor employees. Instead, think about the ways in which you can cultivate all employees.

Tip

- ❖ Find ways to improve poor employee performance through learning and mentorship
- ❖ Encourage high performers to meet their individual needs, while continuing professional development.

Just like there is fertile soil that produces great crops and barren land where little to nothing grows, there are hard working employees and sometimes slackers. Rather than spending time micro-managing employees who you may think need to be watched and prodded into completing tasks or coming in on time, etc. think about how you might cultivate barren land. If we adopt sustainable principles and believe in revitalizing versus wasting,

what could be done to enrich the lives of under-performing employees? Perhaps sending them to a workshop on leadership, helping them find a mentor in the organization, or continuing to highlight any strengths they have could help develop these employees.

Likewise, it is important to replenish high performing employees. High performers should be encouraged to take time off in an effort to conserve energy (this time could range from a break lasting a few minutes, to a vacation lasting several days), selected to participate in personal and professional development programs, and given different responsibilities to continue challenging them. A farmer who wants to sustain land for a long time will not continue to strip the soil of nutrients and plant the same crops repeatedly or leave acres of barren land completely untouched. Instead, crops will be rotated and if land cannot be used for planting regardless of how much it has been fertilized, it can be used to house a barn, make a corral or store crops.

Managers should not take for granted hard working employees, nor should they let underperforming employees slide by under the radar. Think about each employee's talents and challenges and how those things might be assets somewhere within the organization.

6) THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU WANT TO MODEL FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

If you could design the ideal workplace for your children or grandchildren what would it look like? What types of flexibility would they have? Would they have time and space to go rock climbing on a Wednesday, see a movie at matinee prices during the week or take their children trick-or-treating?

Tip

- ❖ Recognize when you need to take time out before reaching your breaking point.
- ❖ Remember you are setting the standards and expectations for future employees.

A sustainable employee knows that he or she is modeling behavior and creating standards that future generations might be expected to uphold. If you are in a position of power, think about whether you do things that encouraging face time in the office or require employees to work from home during non-standard business hours. If these practices are standard, create ways to provide space for employees to cultivate multiple aspects of their lives.

If you are an employee, consider ways you could begin to think about the skills, qualities, and abilities you need to live a fulfilling life now and after retirement. Ask yourself what type of employee you want to be and develop new criteria for evaluating your performance. Will you adopt thinking habits like the ones we outlined for a sustainable employee or will you try and model an outdated version of the good employee?

Summary and Conclusion

In an effort to reconstruct what a good employee is or does, we have introduced the concept of sustainable thinking and practices in the workplace. Our list is certainly not comprehensive, but is a document meant to change and be adapted to individual workplaces.

The United States has moved forward from the Industrial Revolution and managers no longer focus solely on human resources or human relations perspectives for running

It is necessary to work towards developing sustainable employees as a reasonable and advantageous goal.

organizations. Yet, our society continues to use outdated models for determining criteria for what constitutes a good employee. Rather than continue to add to the model of what constitutes a good employee, it is necessary to work toward developing sustainable employees as a more reasonable and advantageous goal.

Although we offer suggestions for managers, by no means is creating a sustainable work identity an individual issue, problem or responsibility. It is important for multiple organizational leaders and employees to facilitate this change. Organizations can adopt flexible work schedules and options, encourage wellness programs, and allow employees to leave before 5:00 if their work is completed. Additionally, top managers could model and reward collaborative behavior, recognize when employees need time off or a break, and encourage employees to talk about and work toward their own goals within organizations.

As we live through economically turbulent times, in which unemployment rates are high, organizational leaders may have the opportunity to exploit workers, ask them to do equal or larger amounts of work for less pay, or do more in order to keep their jobs. However, not valuing the long-term sustainability of their workforce and community will hurt us all in the long run.

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