

Six steps to a healthier working environment from Catherine Davidson, leading mediator, negotiation expert and workplace wellness educator.

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How can companies create a more dynamic, more productive and, more profitable work environment – and at the same time improve employees' health, reduce absenteeism and cut legal claims. The answer, according to Catherine Davidson, Founder and Principal of Catherine Davidson Mediation Services (CDMS), is to focus on boosting workplace wellness – channeling conflict into a positive.

Davidson, a former commercial litigation lawyer who specialises in helping companies achieve higher levels of workplace wellness, presented at Australia's giant festival of workplace health and wellness, the Workplace Wellness Festival 2019 and at the world's largest conference on happiness and wellbeing, Happiness and its Causes 2019. She says that improving workplace wellness can deliver commercial advantage and is one of the keys to building a sustainable and profitable business.

Here are her top tips for creating a working environment that promotes positivity and productivity and helps bring out the best in people.

1. Conduct an organisational health check

Before you introduce any kind of workplace wellness program it's worth discovering your employees' biggest concerns. Are they, for example, stressed by a difficult relationship with a manager or colleague? Do they have more work than they can complete within working hours? Are they worried about leaving work on time to meet other commitments? How confident are they to disagree with their boss? It's important to understand what your employees are worried about so that you can help address their concerns.

'Once you understand the stressors staff are facing you'll be in a better position to design a working environment where they are able to relax and do their best work,' says Catherine.

2. Invest in your people

Forward thinking companies, such as Google and Atlassian, are renowned for their employee benefits and wellness programs. Initiatives might include staff kitchens with healthy food and drinks and exercise and relaxation classes. Catherine's approach is about providing people with a skill set and capacity to work through workplace conflict and issues not just providing 'things'. More companies are embracing this well received, proactive approach.

'Investing in employee wellbeing pays dividends – with fewer sick days, lower staff turnover and higher levels of employee engagement which in turn leads to greater productivity and therefore profitability,' says Catherine.

3. Encourage people to be themselves at work

People are most likely to be engaged and do their best at work when they feel accepted and valued. Employers that actively promote a culture of acceptance and inclusion can help reduce employees' stress levels and keep them healthy and happy at work.

'Employers should allow people to bring their whole selves to work and encourage them to say what they think and take risks. Making mistakes and sharing them enables the entire team to learn from the experience and offers up psychological safety,' says Catherine.

4. Embrace difference

Embracing difference means understanding and appreciating that different people bring unique personality traits, skills and perspectives to the workplace, and that the mix is enriching.

'Meeting and working with people with whom we don't perhaps have a lot in common can be the best way to learn to collaborate, innovate and thrive. Instead of fearing difference, we should look for what we can learn from it,' says Catherine.

5. Understand that conflict can be constructive

Any group or team of people is bound to disagree from time to time. Those disagreements can be the best way to improve on the status quo, generate new ideas and, ultimately, to foster growth. The key to extracting benefit from conflict is to develop effective communication and negotiation skills to help ensure people communicate and engage with each other – and work towards effective solutions.

'Conflict is normal, inevitable and potentially creative – yet most organisations see it as a problem and put in place people and systems to manage and deal with it. I advise people to explore and embrace the opportunities that exist in the space between difference and disagreement – there can be a huge amount of value there,' says Catherine.

6. Create a company culture where disagreement is safe

Employees need to know that disagreeing with colleagues and management sometimes is normal - and essential for a healthy working environment. Encourage people to develop communications skills that enable them to share new ideas and suggestions that might be perceived as critical in a positive and respectful manner.

'Talking about conflict management in the workplace is quite a narrow way of looking at things,' says Catherine. 'In fact, conflict resolution skills are essential life and well-being skills and something we should all nurture and develop.'

To find out more about Catherine Davidson and how she works with clients to enhance workplace wellness visit: <http://www.cdms.com.au>

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