Improving the Work Environment of Youth Workers

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Conscious attempts to improve the work environment date from as early as 1923 with the famous studies to improve productivity at the Hawthorne Works of General Electric. Through the years similar interventions have been followed under the name of organizational development, job expansion, and quality of work life. The effects of such efforts on motivation have been well established by Hertzberg in 1959. Removal of certain qualities of work that cause dissatisfaction (Hygiene Factors) improve company identification and reduce turnovers. Improving certain factors that cause satisfaction improves motivation. These two factors appear to be quite separate, i.e., they are not two poles of the same variables (Korman, 1977).

The work environment of helping professionals is particularly crucial. When the counsellor is experiencing burnout one of the prime symptoms is that the client is dehumanized (Maslach, 1981). The Work Environment Scale (WES) (Moos & Insil, 1981) can be used to analyze the helpers' work situation, and differences before and after some intervention can be analyzed. The instrument is flawed (Buros, 1972) but appears to be a "good enough" instrument for its function. Three subscales of the WES are related to burn-out (Rosenthal, Teague, Retish, West, & Vessell, 1983). These sub-scales are *Work Pressure*, *Supervisory*, *Support*, and *Clarity*.

Two studies were conducted with the staff of a street-work program. This program serves 300 children annually, and employs 45 part-time and full-time youth workers.

In the first study, full-time workers were administered the WES, the staff suggested changes to be implemented (by consensus) and the WES was re-administered. The goal was to improve the work environment and incidentally evaluate the degree of burn-out and the perception of the program as rigid, two possible problems identified in an earlier program evaluation (Waite & Bowick, 1982).

In the second study, new part-time workers were measured before and after training to determine their level of motivation and satisfaction.

STUDY I

Seventeen full-time employees in the street-work program were administered the WES Real and Ideal forms. The results were shared at this next regular staff meeting, and changes in the program were brainstormed. Typical changes to be implemented were adapting the treatment to older clients, increasing training, increasing staff input to supervisor's decisions, and implementation of a short-term intervention program. The instrument was re-administered two months later. A 2 x 2 analysis of variance was conducted on all sub-scales. It was found that generally the scores of the Real form were high, but far from ideal. The changes after intervention were generally non-significant in the non-preferred direction, although physical comfort and control moved significantly in the preferred direction.

The most discrepant attribute was innovation, and it did not change at all between testings. As a result efforts to change the program were redoubled. Several innovative program ideals were passed forward and carried through by staff, regardless of pessimists on staff. The therapy was modernized. And an effort was generally made to support and reward any innovative ideas conceived by staff. The WES Innovation sub-scale was re-administered six months later and a significant increase was measured ($t = 3.1$; $p < 0.01$). This result was confounded however by a labour dispute.

The degree of burnout was determined to be low because the variables identified by Rosenthal et al. (1983) were at acceptable levels: Work Pressure was below average; Supervision Support was high; and clarity was average.

STUDY II

Twenty-five part-time employees were tested before and after training, and six months later with the Real and the Ideal form of the WES. The training program was 10 sessions long, conducted across six weeks. At the end of the program the employees were assigned one child for intensive treatment in the client's home.

The only significant change after training was a reduction in the perceived level of innovation. At follow-up there were further reductions in task orientations and physical comfort. The change total difference between Real and Ideal however did change significantly with time.

The part-time workers' results became significantly more like the results for full-time workers. Eight of nine sub-scale scores moved towards those of the full-time workers ($\Psi^2 = 5.4$; $p < 0.05$). Visual analysis of their profiles indicates that the prematurely terminating staff rated the environment lower on Hertzbergs "satisfiers," and better on "Hygiene Factors." They were however paradoxically more satisfied overall than the staff that completed their cases normally ($t = 1.80$; $p = 0.10$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It appears that the part-time workers entered the training program with unrealistically high ratings of the work environment. After training, they were slightly less satisfied, but had attitudes closer to that of full-time workers. The results for staff who eventually resigned prematurely indicates that they paradoxically had high overall satisfaction levels but had relatively low scores on Motivator variables such as relationship factors and the high scores on Hygiene Factors such as clarity, physical condition, policy matters.

Several implications can be drawn from these results. The training program probably is a good initiation and orientation. Supervisors of these new workers however need to prevent rapid disillusioning presumably by challenging unrealistic expectations and by satisfying the individuals' needs particularly if they are different than the supervisors'.

The full-time workers generally liked the work environment and were not burned out, but until the second retesting, did find the program rigid. Even with best of intentions, the program was frustratingly difficult to change in a meaningful manner. It should be fairly evident that initially low levels of perceived innovation should result in small overall changes in perceived work environment.

Certainly many valid changes were eventually achieved. The salary increase alone was probably enough to justify the exercise. In addition the results on burn-out satisfied the representatives of the agencies' funding bodies, and helped to stabilize on-going funding. In addition the clear empirical understanding of the factors that lead to burn out, and the changes that can actually effect them, cannot help but improve the treatment of the clients.

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