



## **BOOK REVIEW: CREATING HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONS - GRAHAM LOWE**

*...While leadership from the top for a healthy organization vision and goals is important, this alone will not mobilize the workforce to move down the healthy organization path. What is needed is an inclusive approach to leadership that empowers all members of an organization to take responsibility for healthy changes.*

*Success is multidimensional. A healthy organization meets or exceeds its business goals in terms of customers' needs and financial results. It also does more than promote personal health and wellness, providing an overall high quality of work life for employees based on their total experience of their job and work environment. It also provides net benefits for communities by operating in socially responsible ways. In both business and human terms these are the conditions for sustainable success. In every sector of the economy, we can find employers that have developed in their own way a healthy organization. While these journeys have not been guided by a pre-existing model, the approaches follow the same basic logic.<sup>1</sup>*

Dr. Graham Lowe is a leader in the field of workplace consulting and the author of numerous articles and books dealing with the quality of work and healthy organizations. He heads up a consulting firm, [The Graham Lowe Group](#), based in British Columbia, Canada, and is one of the founding partners of the [Great Place to Work Institute Canada](#).

His book (see recommended reading) provides a guide for assessing the health of one's organization, worksites, or units/departments using a basic model outlining fundamental components for a healthy organization. What is really important and emphasized throughout the book, is that, for an organization to move toward to being considered healthy, a holistic and comprehensive approach must be taken. As the author points out, the approach goes beyond simply the promotion of workplace health or employee wellness. One is dealing not so much with promoting the health of individuals through wellness initiatives, but more with the organization as a whole, including its culture and leadership. Throughout the book, numerous examples, including "best practices", are given to illustrate how various organizations have attempted to achieve sustainable success in order to become healthier as organizations.

### ***Integrating the health of an organization as part of financial and operational planning:***

In order to move an organization toward becoming healthier as described by Dr. Lowe, it is essential that the leadership ensure that the strategy to do so is in line with the organization's performance goals — including the goal of comprehensive health promotion — and is aided and not hampered by its existing culture and structure. The suggested "healthy organization value chain" starts with a strong culture grounded on people values and a commitment from top managers, while continuously implementing effective people practices. The results are the creation of vibrant workplaces, inspired employees and the likelihood of sustainable success. All employees, including managers and

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<sup>1</sup> *Creating Healthy Organizations (How Vibrant Workplaces Inspire Employees To Achieve Sustainable Success)*: Graham Lowe, PH.D. (U. of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2010): pp. 22-23

***"Healthier organizations mean more productive employees."***

supervisory staff, need to buy into the healthy organization strategy. As with any other aspects of an organization's and individuals' performance, evaluation measures have to be put in place in order to determine the impact at the level of the individual, job, unit or team and finally the organization. Dr. Lowe provides a number of examples of measurement tools for assessing progress, including measures for wellness 'returns on investment'.

Furthermore, there is a need to tie in the organization's values with its adherence to the notion of corporate social responsibility (CSR). As per Dr. Lowe, although CSR primarily tends to have an external focus, an organization's internal supports often get overlooked. It is difficult to imagine how any organization claiming to be socially responsible from an environmental or community perspective could do so without first demonstrating socially responsible internal people practices (e.g. wellness promotion, health and safety, work-life balance) and ethical business practices.

### **Key elements for achieving sustainable success:**

Dr. Lowe outlines the following as being key elements for achieving sustainable success:<sup>2</sup>

- ☞ *Organizations become more sustainable by taking a long-term approach to success, balancing the needs and interests of all stakeholders.*
- ☞ *Healthy organizations have strong core values that guide the treatment of employees, communities, and the environment.*
- ☞ *Social responsibility commitments open opportunities to embed social and environmental goals into business strategy, inspiring employees in the process.*
- ☞ *Human resource strategies such as workforce diversity and flexible work arrangements benefit employees, the organization, and society.*
- ☞ *Long-range workforce planning is a useful tool for aligning workforce capabilities with the future needs of the business and society.*

Besides providing such important general principles forming the foundation for healthy organizations, the author also provides some excellent specific examples of positive values adhered to and positive people practices implemented by noted organizations. A number of the exemplified organizations have been past recipients of healthy workplace awards received from the [National Quality Institute Canada](#) or have been on annual best employer lists compiled by the [Great Place to Work Institute Canada](#). Such organizations include ArcelorMittal Dofasco, Calgary-based Trico Homes, Trillium Health Centre, SAS, Vancity, the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games, Teck Cominco's Trail Operations, the City of London (Ontario), etc.

### **Designing a healthy organization strategy:**

Often, one reads or hears about the concept of a healthy organization, but is left with little or no clear ideas about how to move toward in order to become a healthier organization. As explained by Dr. Lowe, organizations tend to be at different places on a healthy organization trajectory. For this reason, the first step is to ascertain just where one's organization is on that trajectory by examining and assessing a slew of variables highlighted in the book. As he further notes:

*...And for each of you, the trajectory looks somewhat different, reflecting the distinctive circumstances of your organization. Some of you will already have a healthy organization strategy mapped out, so you will be thinking in more tactical terms about implementation. Others will be looking for ideas that can help to launch a strategy.*<sup>3</sup>

The book provides not only a prescriptive guide, but also an overview of the pertinent issues and a set of useful questions for reflection, discussion and action.

<sup>2</sup> Graham Lowe, PH.D: Op. Cit.: p. 173

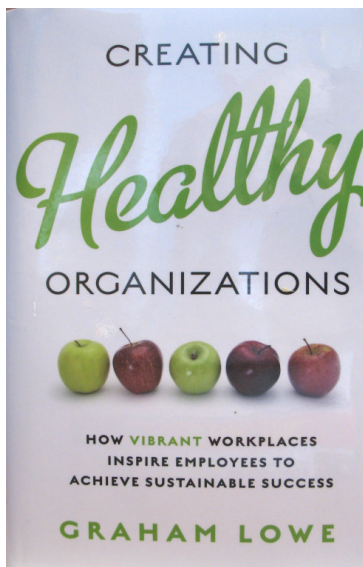
<sup>3</sup> Ibid: p. 222

***"Healthier organizations mean more productive employees."***

It is noted that additional resources to help one to design a healthy organization strategy is available on the book's website at <http://www.creatinghealthyorganizations.ca/>. As part of the notion of 'inclusive leadership' and as 'change agents', it is strongly recommended that the discussions begin at all levels of the organization, involving as many employees or their representatives (e.g. unions) as possible. The first and foremost question is to ask what employees value in their work, workplace and community? Primary values will vary from workplace to workplace, organization to organization, and from sector to sector. Establishing what is important to employees in an organization's culture is a good basis for further discussion, elaboration, and eventually positive change. As Dr. Lowe accentuates, this process must be an integral part of the organization's overall management, and not simply carried out by the organization's Human Resources Department. Indeed, HR policies and practices must be extensively examined from a broader vantage point, beginning a serious commitment by senior management.

### **Recommended Reading:**

For anyone interested in the general topic of healthy organizations, this book is highly recommended as an excellent source of information and guidance from a recognized authority in the field. What is particularly useful are some of the pointers given with respect to how to develop, implement and evaluate a multidimensional healthy organization strategy — especially where one does not already exist. Once again, the research and examples provided in the book underscore the fact that healthier organizations mean more productive employees.



### **“Creating Healthy Organizations”**

*(How Vibrant Workplaces Inspire Employees To Achieve Sustainable Success)*

by Graham Lowe, PH.D.

(U. of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2010)

### **Recommended Web Sites:**

- ◆ Site related to Graham Lowe's book: <http://www.creatinghealthyorganizations.ca/>
- ◆ The Graham Lowe Group Inc.: <http://www.grahamlowe.ca/>
- ◆ National Quality Institute's Healthy Workplace Awards (Canada): <http://www.ngi.ca/awards/Recipients/Recipients2010.aspx>
- ◆ Great Place to Work Institute Canada: <http://www.greatplacetowork.ca/>

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