Fact sheet 2-D: "Social support of colleagues" indicator

Supplement to the Tool for Identifying Psychosocial Risk Factors in the Workplace

Indicators included in the tool

1- Work context and prevention measures in place

A. Job and work context

B. Illness absenteeism and presenteeism

C. Occupational health activities or policy

D. Activities or policy against violence and harassment

E. Return-to-work activities or policy

F. Work/life-balance activities or policy

2- Key components of work organization

A. Workload

B. Recognition at work

C. Social support of immediate supervisors

D. Social support of colleagues

E. Decision-making autonomy

F. Information and communication

What is social support of colleagues?

Social support of colleagues refers to team spirit, the degree of cohesion within a group, and the extent to which colleagues collaborate with and help one another in performing tasks.

Social support of colleagues can be of two types:

1) **Operational,** or task-oriented (instrumental support). This type of social support includes providing a helping hand, ideas or advice in order to help colleagues resolve problems encountered in their work.

2) **Emotional,** or person-oriented (socio-emotional support). When co-workers feel that they are being listened to and can talk freely about their problems, this can help them to overcome problems more easily.

Social support of colleagues is considered to be strong when the members of a team have a high degree of confidence in each other. This support is reflected by colleagues offering each other assistance to resolve problems, sharing tasks, distributing work more effectively in peak periods and taking time to discuss how a particular job should be done. In contrast, low social support is reflected by the presence of harassment, conflicts, incivility and hostile or disrespectful comments among colleagues. Low social support of colleagues can also create a climate of competition and distrust and lead to unfair conduct, isolation and an attitude of "every man for himself" (lack of teamwork or information sharing).

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Why be concerned about this?

Strong social support among colleagues can be a major factor in protecting workers' health. It makes people feel that they are the focus of special attention and helps them to develop a sense of belonging to their workplace. Strong social support among colleagues is usually advantageous when it comes to hiring new employees and retaining staff.

When work organization interferes with the development of a high level of social support among colleagues, the isolation, lack of co-operation and interpersonal conflicts that ensue constitute a risk factor for psychological distress and health in general.

What practices should be implemented?

Here are some examples of organizational and management practices likely to have a positive impact on the "social support of colleagues" indicator.

- Put in place a new-employee welcoming program that involves older colleagues in order to foster mentoring and sponsorship

- Organize regular team meetings where colleagues have time to talk about their work, share information, debate ideas and discuss practices

- Organize team training sessions to enable people to talk about the new material they have learned

- Organize meetings between teams or departments to foster sharing and collaboration

- Give preference to performance evaluation and feedback methods that focus on the collective dimension of work, and limit the number of individual performance evaluations. Such management practices promote collaboration and curb competition among colleagues

- Provide workers with access to common areas or activities that create spaces where people can talk during break times or meals

- Promote and raise awareness among workers about healthy communication, interpersonal respect and conflict resolution methods

- Introduce a "workplace sentinels" program to detect signs of distress among colleagues and offer necessary support

- Ensure stable work teams by protecting employment relationships as much as possible

- Adopt a proximity management approach with employees so as to foster rapid intervention in the case of misunderstandings or conflicts. Unresolved conflicts cause the work climate to deteriorate considerably, can result in the creation of cliques, and have a negative impact on cohesion and team spirit. Colleagues as a whole are directly or indirectly affected by conflicts that fester

- Inform employees about the existence of workers' networks or associations and encourage them to take part in activities or conferences bringing together people from the same trade, profession or field

References and useful links

1. Brisson C., M. Gilbert-Ouimet, C. Duchaine, X. Trudel, M. Vézina (2016). *Workplace Interventions Aiming to Improve Psychosocial Work Factors and Reduce Related Health Problems.* Chapter 16 in Work Stress and Health in a Globalized Economy, edited by Johannes Siegrist and Morten Wahrendorf, Springer International Publishing.

2. Brun, J.-P. (2007). *Les sept pièces manquantes du management*, Les Éditions Transcontinental.

3. Johnson, J., E. Hall (1988). *Job Strain, Work Place Social Support, and Cardiovascular Disease: A Cross-Sectional Study of a Random Sample of the Swedish Working Population*, American Journal of Public Health, Vol. 78, p. 1336–1342.