

Disability Management Parallels Positive Psychology in Work Organizations (Part I of II)

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Background:

All work organizations encounter problems with lost time secondary to employee injury or illness. To some degree, all companies operationalize disability management, which is broadly defined as the organizational prevention of and reaction to lost time associated with employee injury or illness. Proactive Disability Management Programs (DMPs) have become viable and practical human resource management strategies that follow positive psychological principles.

DMPs became human capital strategies after a series of economic studies in the 1990s showed that disability costs in the workplace average 8% of company payrolls and that some organizations were spending as much as 31% of payroll on various consequences of employee disability. Now, after two decades of development, DMPs target *human* factors in the workplace and are designed on psychological principles that govern *human* behavior. For example, underlying assumptions of proactive disability management are that (1) work is a central theme in the lives of individual employees; (2) following the onset of injury or illness, employees want to continue working; and (3) if reasonably accommodated, they can and will return to work. DMPs are thus *human* capital strategies following psychological laws of *human* behavior. DMPs have economic consequences in work organizations.

People acquire disabilities through aging and a multitude of mishaps, diseases, and afflictions, and as with most human problems, disability has been historically viewed through the lens of a medical-disease model. Since World War II, vocational rehabilitation has tended to follow a similar model, one that has paralleled the evolution of psychology, a science largely devoted to healing mental illness rather than enhancing and enriching life skills. Since the days of Sigmund Freud, when the famed psychoanalyst asserted: “I found little that is good about human beings on the whole. In my experience most of them are trash,” psychology and the human behavioral sciences in general have not looked seriously at the positive side of human beings, until recently.

Over the last decade, Positive Psychology has captured the attention of social scientists from around the world. Empirical studies have shown that the “good life” can be found in thriving communities that focus on positive affect, good citizenship, responsibility, altruism, gratitude, moderation, tolerance, and the work ethic. Positive psychologists have begun recognizing that “the best things in life” can be found in meaningful work. Moreover, meaningful and “healthy” work can be experienced by workers with health impairments and employees without impairments in organizations that are committed to positive psychological principles.

The Science of Positive Psychology and Disability Management:

In 1998, Martin Seligman, the renowned University of Pennsylvania psychologist, urged the American Psychological Association (APA) to refocus its mission from exclusively defining and treating mental illness to also finding and advocating pathways to mental health and emotional well being. The APA followed the lead of at least one other profession: Organizational Disability Management. That is, since the mid-1980s, DMPs have evolved from simply allowing the injured worker to collect disability payments (at worst) or litigating the compensable injury claim until resolution (at best) to “light-duty” programs. Now, DMPs implement “proactive” prevention and early intervention processes of refined job selection, employee health maintenance, injury prevention, and transition to meaningful work as quickly as possible following the onset of lost time.

The traditional, now antiquated, medical-disease model of workplace disability (in which only physicians made return-to-work decisions) was comparable to the mental illness/treatment approach applied in the pre-positive stage of psychology, during which psychiatrists and psychologists diagnosed and treated only people with mental illness. Seligman was encouraging his colleagues to focus on character, virtue, optimism, and various other acts in life that prevent and reduce human strife. Psychologists were discovering that among life’s virtues was meaningful work!

Disability managers had already realized that safety programs, wellness programs, employee assistance programs, leadership effectiveness, conflict resolution strategies, and good old common sense in the workplace reduced the number and severity of disability claims. Research from the University of Michigan showed that enlightened employers applying “an integrated continuum of intervention” measurably reduced disability expenditures. Prior to “positive psychology,” it had already become clear to disability management specialists and organizational leaders that most employees experience the “good life” in part through rewarding work and that injured employees respond better to return-to-work efforts if they perceive themselves as valued and respected members of the organization prior to any injurious incident or illness. As a consequence, disability costs were reduced.

DMPs continue to recognize that if an injury or illness were to occur, the organization and not the physician alone can assist the impaired employee with a meaningful transition to work, one executed with purposeful dialogue, reasonable accommodation, and an “integrated continuum” of intervention. What is more, DMPs in the context of viable human resource and human capital paradigms have begun to demonstrate that absence prevention and productivity maintenance are realized through effective employee well being and safety programs. These realizations have led to the proactive (preventive) approach of disability management used in well-managed companies today.

Positive Psychology has begun transforming the world of psychological assessment and treatment by amending the disease model and establishing an empirical basis for what constitutes “the good life.” State-of-the-art disability management has unearthed the understanding that “the good work life” is a function of *sound hiring practices, worker safety, employee wellness, effective interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, broadbrush employee assistance, transformational leadership, and the application of positive human resources* before and after worker injury or illness. Like Positive Psychology, disability management no longer relies

exclusively upon the medical paradigm of disease and sets forth a collaborative model of prevention, early intervention, job accommodation, and return to work.

In the next edition of the PSIA Newsletter, look for Part II of “Disability Management and Positive Psychology in the Workplace.” Learn how you can help transform your workers’ compensation “light-duty” program into a state-of-the-art Disability Management System.

Disability Management Parallels Positive Psychology in Work Organizations (Part II of II)

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In Part I of this article, we introduced Part II by listing positive psychological strategies to help manage workplace disability, including: utilizing sound hiring practices, identifying essential functions, maintaining worker safety, promoting employee wellness, recognizing the importance of effective interpersonal communication, resolving employee disputes and workplace conflicts, implementing employee assistance programs, and facilitating change through transformational leadership. We also promised to list steps toward moving a workers’ compensation “light-duty” program into a state-of-the-art proactive and integrated Disability Management Paradigm. All these strategies require commitment, time, planning, teamwork, and evaluation, and all are well worth the effort. The strategies individually and collectively are best planned, implemented, and evaluated by the Disability Management Committee, with members representing various departments within the organization.

Sound Hiring Practices:

Sound hiring practices are fundamentally important to disability prevention and management and may indeed be more important than safety programs. In reality, only conscientious individuals concerned with the welfare of others (a personal characteristic that can be assessed through careful screening and selection) will become the team players essential to keeping themselves and others safe and well in the workplace. Moreover, conscientious individuals are so **whether or not they have a history of medical impairment**. The notion that a person with a disability is a higher risk for injury in the workplace has long been dismissed as myth. Hiring individuals with disabilities who can be appropriately assigned (with accommodation if needed) is a sound human resource management policy.

The DuPont corporation has been surveying its workforce, dating back to at least 1973, in respect to the effectiveness of employees with disabilities as opposed to employees without. The results have consistently shown that employees with disabilities rated average or better in job performance, and in some years even surpassed their non-disabled co-workers in job performance.

The significance of these and similar studies demonstrates that **transition to work following occupational injury or illness makes good management sense**. Pennsylvania employers who

do not have sound hiring and transition-to-work policies may be failing from the very beginning to establish proactive disability management.

The Importance of the “Essential Functions:”

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) introduced a landmark concept to private sector employers: the “essential functions” of a job. The ADA clarified what constitutes a job. That is, the Job Description must specify the essential functions of that job, and only the essential functions of the job. If a person can do the essential functions of a job, the employer cannot deny the job on the basis of an individual’s inability to do something outside of those functions. In short, the ADA made the existence of a valid Job Description *prima facie* evidence in case of a legal dispute involving discrimination.

That reality led to the need to do verifiable job analyses producing essential function job descriptions. To pass muster, a Job Description is a list of the specific physical and mental activities of a job. The specificity is achieved by observational and physical measurements of non-exertional and exertional activities. Examples of activities include but are not limited to:

- how many hours of standing in measured steps (hours) are required for the job,
- how many pounds of lifting in an 8-hour shift are required, and
- what are the specific repetitions required of the job and how many repetitions per hour.

The Job Description (the outcome) is based solely on the results of the job analysis (the process). The Job Description may no longer be a creative narrative, usually ending with something like, “And other duties as assigned by the supervisor.”

Another aspect of these disability management concerns is the ADA issue of “job accommodation.” The ADA specifically states that if an individual can do what is required in the Job Description, “**with or without accommodation,**” then that person’s application for that job cannot be denied.

Hiring the right person for a job is important to the employer, and hiring the right person must be based on a pre-existing Job Description that in turn is based on a pre-existing job analysis. Returning to work those injured at work with the use of a pre-accident Job Description and job modification is sound human resource management.

It is important to note that the ADA, which was enacted in 1990, is currently in the process of being amended by Congress. The basis of the 2008 amendments is to strengthen the definitions of disability in the original Act, **thereby reinforcing the intent of Congress to support the rights of qualified individuals with disabilities to find meaningful employment in the workplace.**

Worker Safety:

Planning for employee safety in the workplace is a major responsibility for every work organization. Injured employees can be a significant cost factor, and prudent employers do everything they can to minimize injury and lost time. There is no longer variance among business leaders regarding the value of Safety Programs.

If Safety Programs were 100 percent effective, people would not be injured at work and there would be no lost time secondary to occupational accidents. In fact, Safety Programs are not 100 percent effective, but the data are clear that a safe workplace and a safety-conscious workforce are without doubt the most cost-effective disability prevention and management objectives an organization can pursue.

Organizations with effective safety committees are in the best position to smoothly integrate workers with disabilities if they are truly motivated to do so. Success with workplace Safety Programs is generally the result of the organization infusing its culture with workplace safety practices and procedures.

Employee Wellness:

Employers have become aware that it is to their financial benefit to plan and conduct Wellness Programs. As a corollary to a safety initiative, and as an integral component of a comprehensive disability management program, Wellness Programs are prevention methodologies that communicate commitment to a workforce. Issues such as exercise, smoking cessation, obesity, regular physical checkups, drug use, and nutrition are more than feel good concepts. Paying attention to wellness issues carries significant paybacks for employers in terms of reducing absenteeism and limiting the costs of health benefit programs.

Effective Interpersonal Communication:

Lost time from work is too often precipitated by a buildup of tensions between supervisors and subordinates. Interpersonal communication is the key ingredient in establishing cooperative relationships that are vital to workplace productivity. Thomas Gordon began a national movement in leadership effectiveness by promoting the skills of *active listening* to help employees solve problems. Gordon was fond of saying, “being the leader doesn’t make you one.” He recognized that job productivity is most often realized when both the supervisor and the supervisees are getting their needs met. Human beings in the workplace are big challenges for most of us. Instructing front-line supervisors how to effectively communicate interpersonally and maintain good relationships with those they lead not only maximizes productivity, but it improves corporate cultures and prevents the workplace stressors and tension buildups that often lead to carelessness, accidents, and injuries.

Conflict Resolution:

In any workplace, conflicts between employees or between employees and their supervisors are inevitable. Conflict is a part of life, but when it goes unmanaged and unresolved, it can be destructive. Well-managed companies recognize that unresolved workplace conflicts can be very expensive. According to Dr. Daniel Dana, a pioneer in a conflict resolution method known as *Managerial Mediation*, unmanaged conflict is the largest reducible cost in organizations today. It is also the least recognized cost.

Organizational managers can readily take proactive measures to deal with conflict when its existence is recognized. Since specific conflict resolution methods (and even training materials) are available, prudent management can easily adopt methods to teach these skills to their supervisors and managers. Workers' compensation claims can be, and frequently are, the result of unresolved conflict.

Employee Assistance Programs:

Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) represent one of the oldest interventions that good management put into place to increase positive worker relations and productivity. In brief, EAPs begin with the identification of a troubled worker and a planned attempt to assist the employee in ameliorating the personal problem because it affects the employee's productivity. Historically, if an employee had a substance abuse problem, for example, the EAP provided specialized counseling to intervene and assist the employee and his or her family in controlling the condition. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the vast majority of drug users are employed, and when they arrive for work, they don't leave their problems at the door. But, today's EAPs are generally more and more "broad-brush," providing assistance to workers with various psychosocial problems that may be manifesting themselves at work and interfering with workplace relationship and productivity.

Within companies employing a relatively large number of workers, the EAP may begin with an intervention from an in-house staff member, but as with all disability management concepts, front-line supervisors and co-workers are encouraged to assist in making appropriate referrals. In smaller companies, the appropriate referral may be to an external resource. Disability management is, in fact, most effective when it becomes part of the organizational culture. To achieve this level of integration, all effective disability management programs are initiated through transformational leadership.

Transformational Leadership:

While the term transformational leadership may seem somewhat overdrawn, it can be defined in specific terms (concepts). These concepts are what companies should expect of their top leaders. Transformational leadership occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation, action, and morality, according to James MacGregor Burns, the noted presidential biographer who coined the term. Companies that recognize the value of a proactive disability management program generally do

so because their leaders are transformational. That is, they are leaders who are able to recognize opportunities, inspire action, transform outcomes, and facilitate change in those around them.

At minimum, “transformational” leadership includes the following. The leader:

- encourages initiative;
- delegates responsibilities;
- generates ideas and encourages others to generate ideas;
- shares ideas;
- takes calculated risks;
- ensures that all employees have documented goals;
- initiates mentoring and coaching programs; and
- values, trusts, and respects all those who work for the company.

Peak leadership performance may very well be a prerequisite to more fully controlling the financial and human costs associated with workplace accident and injury. However, more often than not, the initiation of a well-designed Disability Management Program is but another manifestation of transformational leadership as described above.

Positive Human Resources:

In companies that are large enough to have Human Resource (HR) programs, the basic methodologies of Disability Management already exist in positive human capital strategies. More often than not, these HR strategies (i.e., health and wellness programs, employee assistance programs, and effective recruitment and selection) represent “silos” or independent programs rather than components of an integrated Prevention and Management System. The synergy (e.g., the whole is greater than the sum of its parts) of these HR programs is a necessary step in creating proactive, integrated prevention and management of disability in the workplace.

A significant correction in professional psychological thought now offers organizations further evidence that proactive, multidimensional, and integrated positive human resource programs are the building blocks of an efficacious Disability Management System. In the past, clinical psychology usually identified human dysfunction and considered ways of treating it. Clinical psychology has spent too much time with late interventions and treatments and too little time preventing illness and promoting strategies for optimal experiences. In 1998 the American Psychological Association (APA) abruptly challenged this historical trend. Through the transformational leadership of Martin Seligman and others, the APA changed its course and focused on identifying the “positive” human virtues and characteristics that lead to the “good life,” including peak human performance, organizational productivity, job satisfaction, and thriving. Positive Psychology focuses on both the theory and methodology of identifying, promoting, and teaching ways in which individuals, schools, workplaces, and communities can identify and experience the best in themselves through optimism, resilience, gratitude, team effort, and devotion.

Proactive disability management represents what is currently among the “best practices” in organizations because it serves to leave no one behind while it promotes organizational health and productivity. Proactive disability management is a function of positive psychological constructs that reflect what is best about human beings when they elevate themselves by devoting time and energy to improve themselves and the lives of others around them.

Steps toward Transforming a Workers’ Compensation “Light Duty” Program into a State-of-the-Art Disability Management System

1. Turn your safety committee into a Disability Prevention and Management Committee and include HR, Medical (Case Management), and legal personnel.
2. Improve hiring practices by using essential function job descriptions and pre-employment testing related to essential job functions.
3. Train line supervisors (leaders) how to communicate – interpersonally – more effectively.
4. Teach managers how to mediate employee disputes and resolve work conflicts.
5. Provide transition-to-work and job accommodation programs.
6. Integrate EAP and Wellness programs into the safety committee as it morphs into a Disability Prevention and Management program.
7. Help leadership become “transformational” by providing information and selling leadership on the merits of Disability Prevention and Management.
8. Be Positive and Optimistic. Have fun and be devoted!