Healthy Systems
THE HEART OF BUSINESS

Creating and Sustaining Healthy Organizations

Practices and Principles of Healthy Organizations

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A Healthy Systems How-To Guide Supplement

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Healthy Systems ebooks provide readers with practical information and tools, focusing on organizational development. We welcome your feedback. info@healthysystems.net.

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WHAT IS A HEALTHY ORGANIZATION?

Individuals thrive in healthy organizations. Vitality and integration describe the culture, flow characterizes the communications and relationships, and focus develops throughout the organization. A healthy organization effectively and efficiently achieves its goals and realizes its vision, which includes and benefits all involved. Hierarchies of power collapse as empowered individuals share knowledge and work together to build organization success.

Does this sound too good to be possible? Yet we know of such organizations. Often we find such vitality and integration, flow and focus in the start-up days of an organization—Ben and Jerry's, Lotus, Southwest, and Apple all reported such qualities in their early days. There is something about beginnings that brings this out in us; just as in times of disaster, when people come together to survive, people also come together to serve great ideas.

How do we claim this health in our organizations for the long term, after the idea has caught on and daily work is about sustaining rather than creating the organization's health? How do individuals achieve balanced lives, loving the work they do as much as their personal time away from work? How do organization leaders establish and sustain health for the organization and in the individuals who work there?

In the Yoga of Leadership (www.healthysystems.net) we are exploring this and we invite your thoughts about how to achieve healthy organizations. Below are some practices and principles of healthy organizations and some simple ways you can get started in your journey toward health.

PRACTICES OF HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONS

Focus on health in your organization

Define three qualities of health that everyone in the organization agrees will make him or her and the organization thrive. Add these to your vision, values, and goals for the year. Focus on them.

Be Open to change as an opportunity for learning and growth.

Identify one major change you face and reframe it as an opportunity. Share this new outlook with everyone; or better yet let the whole group reframe it together.

Release blocks to the health of the organization

Find one area where things are stuck and brainstorm solutions with the people involved. Empower them to find ways to create flow in that area.

(Re) Design your organization for health - integration, flow, focus & clarity

Have a series of brown bag lunches to explore the answers to these questions.

® Are your work practices organized to meet the interests of your stakeholders?

® Are your processes designed to meet your strategic commitments?

® Do your policies support and reinforce enthusiasm and commitment to your goals?

Respect and Serve the larger system in which you operate

Notice how your organization fits into the community or ecosystem where you are located and identify a way the organization can improve that connection.

PRINCIPLES OF HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONS

1. Health IS. Health means wholeness and its nature is a free flow of energy, integration and clarity and focus (intention, self-awareness, self-expression, identity). The potential for health and vitality, in individuals and in organizations, is always present, waiting to be unleashed.

2. Health is dynamic and ever-changing, yet organizations tend to resist shifts in this dynamism -- they tend to behave in predictable, persistent ways that can limit the vitality of the organization. Healthy organizations and the people that comprise them expect and embrace change as a sign of vitality. Recognizing the potential inherent in change allows you to let go of habits and patterns that are no longer productive.

3. All parts of a system are interconnected and so an action in one part effects the whole. Therefore, there is a real connection between the health of an organization and the well being of its individuals. Leaders of healthy organizations understand that the well being of individual employees has an impact on the effectiveness of the organization.

4. Health gets blocked in people and in organizations. This is natural. These blocks take many forms -- outdated policies, fear, habits that no longer serve, tensions, ineffective processes with bottlenecks. Healthy organizations understand that health will at times be blocked and they do something about it when it happens.

5. Healing is a continuous process of releasing blocks to flow and reorienting or stabilizing the system to a new broader/deeper state. Releasing blocks is a requirement for and a practice of health for individuals and organizations. Redesigning processes, surfacing and releasing working assumptions, considering stakeholders, sharing relevant information, resolving conflict, reallocating funds and removing resource constraints are ways to release blocks and initiate organizational healing. Blocks not only need to be freed, but the energy released as fuel for growth must be re-channeled and stabilized in this reorganization.

6. Focus initiates and sustains growth and health. Where you put your attention and the power of that focus set your trajectory and your speed of change. The power of focus lies in its ability to help us overcome our tendency to remain caught in limiting patterns (our own inertia) and move in a desired direction. If you focus on where you are, you stay there. If you focus on health -- on where and how you want to be -- hold that focus and act from it, you will move in your desired direction. Clarity of vision and persistence of intention sustain the improvements of healthy organizations.

7. The state of an organization's health is generated from selected "rules." In complex systems, a few, underlying "rules," or design elements, dictate the shape and functioning of an organism. The rules self-replicate and generate predictable patterns throughout the system. Most powerfully, these rules combine to generate a state that is greater than the sum of the parts. Leaders of healthy organizations respect and carefully (re) design the powerful few "rules" that support a state of vitality. As example, organizational measurements or "rules" we choose as success factors drive employee work habits. Be careful! The wrong rule will drive the wrong behavior.

8. There is value in simplicity. Simplicity increases the capacity and potential for change. Healthy organizations keep it simple by implementing mechanisms for simplicity. Clarify your vision and values. Integrate and establish the relevance of projects and initiatives. Drop non-productive activity. Focus on underlying patterns.

9. You are part of a larger system. An organization cannot be separated from the larger community that surrounds it. Organizational boundaries are a matter of perspective and identification. A healthy organization increases the flow and integration between itself and the larger system so as to benefit and serve all the parts. Aspects of this include social and ethical implications, an embrace of diversity because variety strengthens a system, community service, stakeholder analysis, environmental impacts, partnerships and sustainability.

10. Elegant solutions to systemic problems defy common logic and gut instincts. Healthy organizations are not confused by paradox -- apparent contradiction. They live with, transcend and reframe apparent contradictions, celebrating them as enlightening. What seems wrong from one perspective is true from another. For examples, what is considered resistance from one perspective is considered fuel for growth from another; problems can be re-framed as opportunities; in letting go or surrendering we gain power; conflict is the other coin side of solidarity. Healthy organizations embrace and seek inclusive solutions.

About Healthy Systems

Healthy Systems is a management consulting firm that aligns and integrates the people, processes and strategic directions of an organization—for the health of the organization and the well-being of its employees.

We train and coach organizations in the dynamics of complex systems and in the skills, tools and strategies for creating and sustaining a vital and balanced workplace.

Healthy Systems works in collaboration with organization development and training specialists to meet your specific and customized needs.

Healthy Systems provides consulting and customized training for organizational effectiveness, focusing on methods to create and sustain vitality and relevance in meetings, projects, processes, planning and interpersonal relationships.

About Sara Grigsby

Sara Grigsby has worked professionally as an organizational development consultant, trainer and facilitator since 1985, providing project-based management, coaching, training and event facilitation services to a variety of corporate, public agency and health care clients.
Sara is the founder of Healthy Systems and its lead consultant.

She has been writing about Organization Development and creating tools to help others create healthy systems since 1995. Her CV is available online: http://healthysystems.net/htmls/about/sara.html

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