



Assertiveness and Diversity underpins Workplace Wellness

*By Anni Townend, Business Psychologist and author of *Assertiveness and Diversity* published by Palgrave Macmillan (September 2007)*

www.annitownend.com

In our working environments we are all linked into a network of relationships. Just how good they are, can impact on our own 'wellness' and our effectiveness at work. The quality of our communications and our relationships is crucial. To flourish, people need to be able to express themselves with confidence: to feel safe and to know that there is respect for difference within their place of work. Assertiveness and diversity are very closely entwined and addressing them together creates a truly healthy workplace not only by shaping a sense of wellbeing for individuals but in fostering a sense of 'welldoing' in the way they regard themselves and others.

We are after all different and by understanding and appreciating this helps people to build bigger, more assertive, relationships. They can be open, honest and direct with each other. Such relationships are characterised by inclusivity and a level of trust that facilitates learning and development, creativity and innovation. In this kind of environment, even when there is conflict, people are able to work with their differences. They experience conflict as an opportunity to empower people and transform their relationships. The underlying reason for such positivity is that people feel well in themselves and well with each other.

This feeling 'well' is a powerful dynamic. If people feel well they have a strong connection with themselves, physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. They'll take responsibility for themselves, for their own wellbeing and are able to connect more strongly with others. They'll be mindful of who they are being and how they are relating to others in what they are doing. That's demonstrated by being sensitive to others' physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual wellbeing.

A high level of awareness in their relationships needs some conscious effort. People need to take time to reflect on their values and beliefs. It is essential to understand how these influence the choices and decisions they make on a daily basis. Part of knowing 'who I am being' involves recognising beliefs that are self-affirming and affirming of others, as well as those that can be self-limiting and that can impact negatively on how they feel in themselves and on their behaviour towards others. By understanding these values and beliefs, reflecting on them and being open to giving, receiving and asking for feedback from others is all part of learning and developing through relationships, and working with differences. Being acknowledged through being seen and heard is a key to inclusivity and to a sense of wellbeing and of 'welldoing'.

There are many practical ways in which organisations can achieve this. A lot of private and public sectors organisations offer coaching to senior leaders and managers. This coaching is an opportunity to explore and clarify their values and beliefs. It is a chance to reflect on them and the impact of their communication on others. Leaders within organisations have a

particular responsibility to lead on issues of diversity through their own values and behaviours and to build relationships that are inclusive and express the value of difference.

A part of developing assertive and inclusive relationships involves people in being truly curious about differences, of checking out assumptions and biases that they may otherwise bring to their relationships. It is all about a deeper level of engagement by paying attention to others, noticing them, listening to and asking open questions of them. Taking responsibility for feelings, thoughts, fears and fantasies around difference enables people to talk more openly. A simple but effective way of doing this is make statements and to enquire of others using the personal pronoun 'I'. It is surprisingly effective, taking responsibility for our 'emotional truth', thoughts and ideas but it can be challenging for those of us more used to saying 'you' and 'one' as a generalised way of speaking.

Many organisations provide opportunities for people to give and receive feedback. Through 360 Review feedback people are able to use their reviews to seek more feedback from colleagues and through doing this engage with each other and their differences. Providing opportunities to seek more feedback – whether formally or informally – helps people to appreciate their differences, and to see these differences as strengths. Equally people are encouraged to pay attention to challenging feedback and to look for the 'stretch' and their 'growth gift'. Through this process of engagement people learn and develop together rather than in isolation and leads to greater workplace overall wellness through the bigger relationships that can result.

Organisations that encourage people to be their 'best selves' at work are also facilitating assertiveness and diversity. In their workplaces they are acknowledging that people have needs, roles and responsibilities outside work as well as in the office – and that these needs, roles and responsibilities will change over time. In giving recognition to people's differences they are promoting workplace wellness. Flexible working, too, enables people to make choices and be responsible for negotiating what works best for them in relation to their work, their working relationships and their life outside work. Some organisations recognise that employees may need support through counselling, offering it to their staff and families through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) whilst others have a Corporate Ombuds Service, primarily to support people in dealing with workplace issues.

Assertiveness and diversity hinge on acceptance and a willingness to engage with each other in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of our differences. It is these differences which make us unique and, at the same time, the same.