



## **Time to pass your own *Healthcare Reform Bill!***

**... and recognize that poor leadership  
is increasing your healthcare costs.**

*By Nancy L. Clark*

Helloooo ... does anyone see the irony that I do? Companies are spending millions and millions on incentive programs to help employees and their families with their healthcare. Yet, these same companies ignore what is right in front of their faces --bad managers creating unhealthy work environments.

I apologize for climbing upon the virtual soapbox, but I feel the need to point out – THE EMPEROR HAS NO CLOTHES. And while I absolutely applaud all the carrot and stick health programs that companies are creating and adopting, one of the health elements that organizations have the greatest control and influence over is being ignored -- whom they put into positions of power.

Well the dirty little secret is out ... new research links having a poor supervisor to a higher risk of heart attack. Plus, no surprise, employees who don't like their managers also take more sick leave. By ignoring this problem, both health and productivity are at risk – a double drag on profits, let alone on the human factor.

Anna Nyberg, a postgraduate student at the Karolinska Institute in Sweden, analyzed the results of nearly 20,000 surveys of European workers. The findings confirmed what most of us probably already suspected. According to Nyberg, the findings “provide clear support for an association between managers’ leadership and employee stress and health.”

Nyberg took a deeper dive and found that male workers in Stockholm, Sweden, had a 25% higher risk of heart attack over the 10 years following the survey if they'd said their bosses were less than satisfactory. The heart attack rates increased the longer that the employees had to suffer with bosses they dislike.

Workers who complained about poor supervision also took more sick time. As Nyberg noted, this is an indication that “employees may take sick leave as a means to cope with stress due to destructive leadership at work and perhaps to prevent their health from becoming affected.”

The director of the Behavioral Medicine Research Center at Duke University, Dr. Redford Williams, said stress at work — such as that caused by a boss with poor leadership skills — “arouses the body's fight/flight response, causing changes in stress hormones that increase blood pressure, inflammatory cytokines, blood glucose levels, even makes platelets stickier and more likely to clot.” Williams added, “It's still safe to conclude that poor leadership has

the potential to adversely affect the health of the led. It's likely that there are differences in how sensitive different persons are to these effects, but still clear that poor leadership is bad for health."

So why would companies not tackle this problem of poor supervisors causing unhealthy employees? Good question. My guess is that some leaders are the problem, others may think it is too hard to solve, and still others are in denial.

Despite being difficult, the rewards for improving your supervisors even a little could pay off handsomely—happier, more productive employees combined with decreased healthcare costs. At least for those who are aware and want to do something, here are some actions you can take or can suggest:

1. Honestly assess the "supervisor-caused health risks"
  - Implement a 360° assessment program and analyze the results
  - Conduct your own "heartbeat" program (meet directly with small groups of frontline workers to understand firsthand what is happening)
  - Engage outside consultants to investigate and identify risks
  - Study company health reports and attendance records – do they point to specific supervisors?
2. Study best practices of other companies/leaders
  - Investigate what *The Best Companies to Work For* are doing\*
  - Identify the leaders in your company who are outstanding and who do not create health risks in their people
    - Leverage them as mentors
    - Determine what makes them outstanding and hire/promote more of them
3. Analyze yourself and make sure you model the right behavior
  - Engage the leadership team to share the vision for healthy supervision and help them model it as well
  - Don't tolerate bad supervisors – help them or remove them
4. Examine your recognition and reward systems – do they align with your healthy approach to supervision; if not, change them. What gets rewarded gets done.
5. Integrate with your other health incentive programs
  - Anti-smoking and anti-obesity support
  - Gym membership reimbursements
  - Free health coaching
  - Insurance-premium discounts to those who meet health standards—and surcharges to those who don't
  - Computer software that forces breaks to avoid repetitive motion injuries
  - Etc.
6. Pass your company's Healthcare Reform Bill that includes all of the above; implement with clear measures and goals; communicate and monitor regularly

With any luck, your Healthcare Reform Bill may set the standard for Congress!

\*I am aware of one thing that 15% of Fortune Magazine's 2009 *Best Companies to Work For* do—they use the Predictive Index®.