

Consider a New Year's "Health Checkup" for Your Organization

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2011, published in the *Houston Home Journal* on Saturday, January 1, 2011

Does your organization have high cholesterol? How about high blood pressure? How would you know? Both are symptomless in human beings, but if undetected and untreated, both can contribute to conditions far more significant, such as a stroke or a heart attack.

Some of you don't visit your physician regularly. You don't feel any pain, so you presume you are healthy. Some of you may say that you prefer not to know if something is wrong. You figure "ignorance is bliss." As long as you are able to handle your responsibilities every day, you'll just keep going until something major comes along.

If you haven't had a physical exam in a couple of years, you probably have some reason for having put it off. And as you age, it seems easier year after year to continue to put it off, doesn't it?

That's kind of the way it can be with an organizational health checkup. Nobody's going to force you to do one. And if there's no pain, why even do any checking? If nobody's doing any complaining, things must be going okay, right?

At least somebody has told you that a routine physical exam is an appropriate and valuable thing to do. Perhaps, however, no one has ever suggested to you that you should have a comparable evaluation of your organization's health.

Just because there is no overt pain doesn't mean there aren't some hidden problems that could use some attention. After all, most of your employees value their jobs, so they aren't likely to be complaining very loud. More importantly, there are probably many opportunities for improvement in revenues, productivity, reliability, quality, safety, customer satisfaction, or employee retention.

You might respond by saying, "Ah, but we measure all those results, and we're doing just fine!" I don't doubt that you are, and maybe measuring the end result is sufficient. But if in your personal health you measured only strokes and heart attacks, you'd not be aware that you could take action in advance to lower their risk. Just as there are measures for causative factors in your personal health, there are measurable causative factors in organizations, too.

Every organization's work is conducted in processes, and few organizations measure the routine health of their processes. And the way you execute work in your organization is a function of your culture. Few leaders could tell you what symptoms represent a healthy culture. In fact, many leaders have a difficult time even describing their organization's culture. If pressed, they might say that culture is "just the way we do things around here."

Right! Culture is merely the collection of behaviors and values that have developed over time. Few organizations have an intentional culture, so there are many opportunities for improvement in most organizational cultures. Interestingly, in the absence of a conscious health checkup, the person who can most easily detect opportunities for improvement in your culture is a new employee.

He or she comes into the organization with no previous knowledge and has to sense what's "okay behavior" and what's "not okay behavior." Based on past experiences, new employees often question why certain processes are executed the way they are. They've worked in organizations where things were done differently, sometimes far more effectively. Ah, but a new employee rarely carries the influence necessary to improve ingrained behaviors.

When a new year rolls over, we often reflect on our past behaviors. We sometimes set promises to ourselves to do some things differently. Typical resolutions address physical and financial fitness. I'm just suggesting that you might consider reflecting on the successes of your organization and maybe digging a little deeper than surface issues.

In much the same way that you trust your physical exam to a trained physician, you might look for a trained organizational health professional to help you seek potential improvements in your organization's processes and culture!