

Mental health minded

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When companies boast commitment to their employees, that dedication commonly takes shape in benefits packages, retirement plans and insurance. But organizations are often missing a key consideration when it comes to workers: mental health.

In a 2008 survey of more than 450 Canadian companies conducted by global human resources consultant Mercer, nearly 80 per cent of participants said employee mental health issues have increased in importance over the last three to five years. But just 13 per cent said their senior leadership is even mindful of how mental health impacts their organization.

With such little top-down awareness of the importance of mental health, it would appear New Westminster, B.C.,-based financial institution Westminster Savings Credit Union is an outlier. This year, the credit union won its second consecutive Psychologically Healthy Workplace Award, a bi-annual honour bestowed by the B.C. Psychologically Healthy Workplace Collaborative.

"Some might think winning an award means you can rest on your laurels, but we don't have that opinion," said Darlene Dean, people services vice president for WSCU. "We continue to focus and move forward and make things better as we go."

Its commitment to progress was accentuated during the recent economic downturn. Not only did the WSCU introduce a flexible benefits program and guaranteed no layoffs (which Dean reasoned with the regular availability of side projects on which to use talent), but it created resiliency workshops for employees to deal with the public.

"They're working with members who have lost their jobs or have family members or close friends that have been affected by the economy," said WSCU people engagement manager Joanna Whalley, "We really felt it was important to help our employees by giving them a venue to discuss the changes and provide them with tools to help them move forward."

The credit union defines its focus by a "healthy workplace strategy" it enacted three years ago, which Dean said is rooted in communication, recognition and employment branding. To measure progress, it uses regular employee surveys on issues big and small, a seemingly common company effort Whalley said is often just lip service for other organizations.

"We involve employees at all levels in the action planning process so they get to help their managers and work on things that are specifically of interest to them," she said.

For instance, one employee put forth a suggestion in the WSCU's Bright Ideas program to eliminate water coolers to save costs. Put to a survey, Whalley said employees overwhelmingly turned down the idea due to water's health benefits over coffee. "There's an example of involving employees in a real quick fix to get their input into something before just making a decision based on dollars."

Beyond surveys, the credit union relies on several employee-led committees to make decisions, including its Live Well Now internal wellness program, which manages an annual budget to promote employee awareness of health, wellness and work-life balance.



In addition to offering benefit packages, retirement plans and insurance, the Westminster Savings Credit Union offers mental health programs for its employees.

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