Staff wellbeing is not enough

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Introduction: Originally, *Duty of care* referred to an organization's legal obligation to avoid acts or omissions likely to cause harm to staff or others.   However, the discussion has moved on and the term now carries broader meaning. Today, duty of care denotes an organization's responsibility for staff *wellbeing*, particularly in regard to physical and mental health at work. This is a noble goal and a significant improvement to previous standards of care. However, it remains an inadequate goal. Don't we want to see our staff *thrive* at work, just as we want to see ourselves thrive?   Let's bring this conversation up a notch and discuss how we can create workplaces where staff can thrive rather than just be physically and mentally safe. [1]

A brief history of duty of care

The term 'duty of care' stems from English tort law, particularly from the 1932 case of Donoghue v Stevenson which in the UK helped established the modern legal obligation to adhere to a standard of reasonable care while performing any acts that could foreseeably harm others. Donoghue found a dead snail in her bottle of ginger ale and sued the brewer Stevenson for damages for his negligence. This case, perhaps more than any other, established the modern day notion that an implicit (and legally binding) social contract exists between an individual and others in society to *take reasonable care to avoid acts or omissions that are likely to injure your neighbor*.[2]   In human resource jargon, duty of care most often has to do with an employer's legal and moral obligation to take reasonable care to protect staff from foreseeable harm in the workplace. As such, the duty of care discussion is a conversation about the implicit and explicit social contract between employees and employers. However, discussions on *standards of care* must precede any notions of *duty of care*, so as to establish what is reasonable and thus provide a basis for what is considered negligent.

Today, the standards of care are significantly higher than in 1932.[3]   Industry groups, unions, and government entities have established standards of care. In my own industry, People-in-Aid (now the CHS Alliance) have been pioneering standards of care in the international aid sector. In my own country of Sweden, in April of 2016, the government activated workplace environment law AFS 2015:4, which outlines new standards of care regulations for Swedish workplaces. High duty of care standards are also being established by pacesetting organizations. Yet, there are moral choices that need to be made by CEOs and board of

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[1] An earlier version of this article was presented at the UNFPA Career Development Roundtable, Helsinki - 9 December 2016

[2] Neighbor Principle (developed by Lord Atkin in the Donoghue v Stevenson (1932) AC 562 (HL Sc).

[3] It must be said that even in the 1700 and 1800s there were notable business leaders who were centuries ahead of their times in regard to duty of care. Author Guinness (1725-1803) of Guinness Beer, John Cadbury (1801-1889) of Cadbury Chocolates, and John Wannamaker (1838-1922) of Philadelphia, PA are three notable business leaders who developed innovative policies and practices to help their employees thrive.

directors when it comes to standards of care. As I see it, there are three[4] basic standard of care frameworks that organizations can choose from. These are:

1. Safety (Minimalist) Standards (traditional organizations)
No law is broken. There is no obvious negligence to staff safety, especially physical safety. The emphasis in these organizations is to not break any law and not to be found negligent. HR is given the task to, "Make sure we conform to all the laws…or at least ensure that we do not get caught." Leaders of these type of organizations are typically more focused on their stockholders (or other constituents) wellbeing then on their staffs'.

2. Wellbeing Standards (learning organizations)
No laws are broken and efforts are being made (beyond what the law requires) to implement industry/sector standards for staff wellbeing. The emphasis in these organizations is to meet or exceed industry standards. Typically you will find initiatives aimed at preventing staff burnout, reducing stress, losing weight, stopping smoking, and other important programs to protect physical and mental health of staff. HR is given the task to, "Make sure our staff are safe and that we meet industry standards." This is where almost all the duty of care discussions in the HR sector are taking place today.

3. Thriving Standards (developmental organizations[5])
No law is broken. Industry standards are met or exceeded. In addition, new policies and practices are being tested to help staff *thrive* on the job. The emphasis in these organizations is not only to keep staff safe (mentally and physically) but to facilitate their thriving. HR is given the task to, "Help keep our staff safe and meet all industry standards; but also help us as an organization become a place where staff thrive." Embracing *a standard of staff thriving* will normally require a reframing of many organizational priorities and practices. This is where insufficient debate is taking place in the HR sector.

What do we mean by thriving? Let us defer to the research of Spreitzer and Porath (2012) who for many years have been researching the nature of thriving in the workplace. Together with their colleagues, they surveyed or interviewed more than 1,200 white and blue collar employees in an array of industries. They developed a definition of thriving that divides the concept into two parts, namely *vitality* and *learning*:

> V*itality*—the sense that you're energized and alive; and *learning*—the gaining of knowledge and skills. When you put the two together, the statistics are striking. For example, people who were high energy and high learning were 21% more effective as leaders compared to those who were only high energy. The outcomes on one measure in particular—health—were even more extreme. Those who were

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[4] In *Beyond the Learning Organization*, (2000), Gilley and Maycunich argue the *developmental organizations* are further in the evolutionary process than *traditional organizations* and *learning organizations* in the area of organizational renewal and competitive readiness. Here I liken Gilley and Maycunich's three organization types with the three duty of care choices of safety standards, wellbeing standards, and thriving standards.

[5] Not to be confused with *development organizations* as in the international aid sector. Here the term development*al* organizations refers to an organizational philosophy type descried by Gilley and Maycunch (2000).

high energy and low learning were 54% worse off when it came to health than those who were high in both.[6]

Where staff are thriving there is vitality and learning. Thriving is neither happiness nor contentment. Happiness and contentment are byproducts of thriving.

Isn't it obvious?
Shouldn't staff thriving, not just staff wellbeing, be a fundamental objective of organizational leadership? Is thriving a concept reserved just for home or free time environments? If so, consider how we have created a situation where burnout, disappointment, and mediocracy are the only possible outcomes. Consider that most adults send more than 70% of their waking hours at work, preparing for work, or traveling to work; more than 100,000 hours over a lifetime.[7] If thriving is not expected to take place at work, how can we expect human thriving to exist at all? Are we expected to squeeze all of our thriving into that 30% of our waking hours when we are not at work? Perhaps the idea is to postpone our desire to thrive until retirement? Is it not absurd to think this way? Don't organizational leaders have a moral obligation to do their best to facilitate staff thriving at work? I think so.

I hope this doesn't strike you as "ho hum, I've heard these idealistic ravings before; be realistic. Don't you have anything new, anything practical?"

While I am not proposing that this idea is new, I am proposing that this idea is distinctively moral and practical. It should be a non-negotiable expectation for both staff and the organizations that hire them. The practical implications to staff are obvious. Among the many practical advantageous outcomes to organizations are greater staff engagement and retention, heightened capacity for organizational renewal and competitive readiness. However, my point for this paper is this: *if we only aim at making our workplaces "safe" we are aiming too low. We need to aim at making our workplaces environments where thriving is facilitated. We need to build organizational cultures where thriving is expected, reinforced, and rewarded.[8]*

In my experience, there are very few organizations where staff are consistently thriving at work. I believe there are two main reasons for this; neither employees nor employers have made thriving a workplace expectation. Both employees and employers tend to be satisfied with a "safe" or "survive" standard rather than a "thrive" standard. It takes courageous employees to give up high paying jobs that they dislike for low paying jobs they enjoy. It takes courageous employers to shape their workplace environments for staff thriving; when they are only legally responsible for staff safety. The quest for staff thriving is not without its risks.

There is much more that needs to be said. Indeed, many people are researching and writing about these issues. However, for this paper, let me close with five practical ideas that have proven to help facilitate staff thriving. Spreiter and Porath's research suggest four actions

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[6] Spreitzer, G. and Porath, C. (2012) Creating Sustainable Performance, Harvard Business Review, See: https://hbr.org/2012/01/creating-sustainable-performance
[7] Assuming a working life of 44 years
[8] Jorg Schmitz (2012) aptly defines culture as "What is expected, reinforced, and rewarded within a group."

organizations can take to help employees thrive that don't take a herculean effort depending on the organization's culture and assuming that the workforce is comprised of people who want to thrive. They advise[9]:

1. **Providing decision making discretion** – Employees at every level are energized by the ability to make decisions that affect their work. Empowering them in this way gives a greater sense of control, more say in how things get done, and more opportunities for learning.
2. **Sharing Information –** Doing our job in an information vacuum is tedious and uninspiring; there's no reason to look for innovative solutions if you can't see the larger impact. People can contribute more effectively when they understand how their work fits with the organization's mission and strategy.
3. **Minimizing Incivility[10]** – The costs of incivility are great, both in staff disengagement and real costs. Half of the employees who had experienced uncivil behavior at work intentionally decreased their efforts. More than a third deliberately decreased the quality of their work. Two-thirds spent a lot of time avoiding the offender, and the same number said their performance had declined.
4. **Offering Performance Feedback** – Feedback creates opportunities for learning and the energy so critical for a culture of thriving. By resolving uncertainty, feedback keeps people's work-related activities focused on personal and organizational goals. The quicker and more direct the feedback, the more useful it is.

My own research[11] and that of others, points to the important role that "fit" plays in staff thriving. Finding and facilitating fit is both the responsibility of the individual staff member and the organization. The onboarding process of interviewing, selecting, and orienting new staff plays a major role in finding fit.

5. **Facilitating workplace "fit"** – fit is the idea of helping staff find their niche in the workplace. It is about aligning skills, inner motivations, personality, and other characteristics with a job that needs doing. Internships and onboarding processes play a major role in this, but so do systems for moving people to other parts of the organizations or out of the organization. "Fit" is not only a concept of the right person for the right job it is also a concept of the right person for the right people. There is job fit and people fit. Thriving happens best when the person fits both the job and the fellow stakeholders surrounding the job. Mutually satisfying work relationships contribute strongly to a sense of fit. On the other hand, workplace conflict contributes strongly to a sense of *mis*fit, stress, and dissatisfaction. In my experience and research, finding our fit is a bit like riding bumper cars[12] in that most people who find their fit do so through a somewhat gritty process of trial and error. If it happens, it is more likely to happen after your mid-thirties than before.

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[9] Spreitzer, G. and Porath, C. (ibid)

[10] Incivility is rude and offensive behavior such as being publicly rebuked or bullied at work. Having working conflict resolution policies and practices is an important part of minimizing and dealing with workplace incivility.

[11] Breslin, R.S. (2014) Exploring the professional journeys of exemplary expatriate field leaders. See: http://www.chsalliance.org/resources

[12] Bumper cars are an entertainment attraction often found in amusement parks and carnivals.

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Conclusion

Thriving is not something an organization can do for its staff but rather something each staff member must decide and strive towards. It requires a degree of self-awareness that comes through trial and error. Each staff member must be willing and responsible to do what it takes to thrive at work.

However, even a good seed cannot grow in bad soil. First, organizational leadership needs to decide that "staff thriving" is an important bottom lines for measuring organizational success. Next they need to create policies, practices, and funding to create environments for staff thriving. If we only aim at making our workplaces "safe" we are aiming too low. We need to have the goal of making our workplaces environments where thriving is facilitated. We need to build organizational cultures where thriving is expected, reinforced, and rewarded. That, in my opinion, is our duty of care.

About our author

Dr. Scott Breslin is the international director of Operation Mercy (www.mercy.se), a Swedish NGO with over 300 staff in 12 countries in Central Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. He is also a senior advisor with the Nordic School of Management (www.nsm.se) and adjunct faculty at Örebro University's School of Business. Scott lived in Istanbul, Turkey for 22 years where he worked as the country director for Millennium Relief & Development Services (www.mrds.org) as well as did consulting assignments with Honeywell Corp and other multinational organizations. He holds a Doctorate in Education from the University of Edinburgh, M.Div. from Trinity Theological Seminary, M.S. Education and a B.S. in Business Education from James Madison University.