

## Managers – The New Super Food? By Ken Pinnock

**W**e all know about the benefits of so-called super foods — spinach, beans, sweet potatoes, nuts, berries, avocado, salmon. These foods and the nutrients they contain have been shown to help reverse cardiovascular disease, control BMI, regulate and positively impact insulin levels, impact brain health, and much more (the very things our workplace wellness programs often focus on). But did you know that, in the workplace, the behavior and leadership style of managers has also been shown to have a very real effect on these same physiological factors in employees?

### What Does the Research Show?

There has been much research over the last decade looking at how manager behavior impacts employee health. And guess what the findings show? How we treat people matters (not exactly earth shattering news, huh?). Several studies out of Europe and Canada have correlated leadership style and supervisor behavior to employee wellbeing, or lack thereof. Here are just a few findings from some of those studies (and there are many more out there presenting similar results):

1) A study published in 2004 looked at 63 supervisory behaviors related to control and flexibility, leadership, communication, social support, consideration, looking out for employee wellbeing and more. Findings consistently showed that even when individual health factors such as age, stress and weight were taken into account, supervisor behavior impacted employees' physical and mental health. (*Gilbreath, B. and Benson, P.G. 2004. The contribution of supervisor behaviour to employee psychological wellbeing. Work & Stress 18(3): 255-266*)

2) One recent study of 3,100 males in Stockholm, Sweden, showed that managerial leadership style was more strongly associated with ischemic heart disease than typical job strain/stress. (*Nyberg, Anna. 2009. The impact of managerial leadership on stress and health among employees. Department of Public Health Services*

*NASP-National Prevention of Suicide and Mental Health, Karolinska Institute)*

3) One study in the United Kingdom showed employees who felt that they experienced a high level of justice (being treated fairly) at work had lower incidences of cardiovascular events (even after factoring in alcohol and tobacco use, hypertension, physical activity and BMI).



And employees who worked for multiple supervisors had lower blood pressure readings on days when they worked with the supervisor(s) they perceived as fair. (*Justice at Work and Reduced Risk of Coronary Heart Disease Among Employees: The Whitehall II Study*)

4) A 2011 Canadian study of nurses who worked for managers who were relationship oriented versus task oriented had fewer incidents of sick days. (*Schreder, J.A., Roelen, C.A., Van Zweeden, N.F., Jongsma, D., Van der Klink, J.J., Groothoff, J.W. 2011. Leadership effectiveness and recorded sickness absence among nursing staff: A cross-sectional pilot study. Journal of Nursing Management 19: 585-595*)

### What Factors Impact Employee Health and Wellbeing?

It's common knowledge that feelings of distress, fear and anxiety raise blood pressure, heart rate and cortisol

levels. The primary function of cortisol is to increase blood sugar in times of stress, preparing the body for “fight or flight” — a good thing when running from a bear, but not so helpful when dealing with a bad boss day after day. Increased levels of cortisol have been shown to suppress the immune system, which is why people under constant stress suffer more illness and, therefore, absenteeism from work.

Several factors (all of which managers have some degree of control over) can lead to increased stress for an employee, which oftentimes manifests itself in myriad physical ways. These factors include:

- Boredom
- Lack of control over work
- Role ambiguity
- Professional stagnation
- Not having input into decisions that impact an individual and his or her work
- Feelings of being treated unfairly

## What Can We Do?

Chances are, a good number of employees at your institution are physically feeling the effects of poor management. However, as HR professionals, we are in an excellent position to intervene. With supervisory skills training (which can actually be positioned as part of a comprehensive workplace wellness program), we can teach our managers how to be more supportive, relational, just and kind.

So just which skills and traits do we need to focus on? The following supportive supervisory behaviors have all been shown to foster positive employee/manager relationships and decrease employee stress levels and have been correlated with lower BMI levels and better cardiovascular health:

- flexibility as to how employees do their work
- encouraging employees to ask questions
- planning work to level out the load
- showing appreciation
- effectively managing team conflict

- reinforcing to staff that their work has value
- reducing role ambiguity and building role clarity
- regularly reviewing and aligning policies and practices and making sure they are followed uniformly
- conducting retention interviews (regularly checking in just to see how things are going)
- providing a realistic job preview (honesty — the good, the bad and the ugly — about the job/duties during the interview process to minimize surprises later)
- increasing an employee’s control over his or her work
- regularly providing and soliciting feedback
- reinforcing positive states (gratitude, compassion, empathy, kindness, courage, forgiveness)

## What Have We Learned?

Research has shown time and again that manager behavior significantly impacts an employee’s physical and emotional wellbeing. Ineffective management practices often cause an employee to feel stressed, and prolonged stress has been shown to increase the risks of several physical symptoms, including headaches, high blood pressure and heart disease, as well as psychological symptoms like depression and anxiety (which can cause physical symptoms in and of themselves). And what happens when our employees aren’t well? We begin to see decreased productivity, higher absenteeism, lower job satisfaction and an increase in turnover.

To combat this, we need to hone in on and improve upon managerial behaviors and organizational practices that reinforce employee health and wellbeing. Through proper training and sustained support, we in human resources can help our managers and leaders transform into the new super foods of our organizations. 

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**Hey managers — are you a super food or a cheeseburger? Fill out the employee relationship quiz on page 17 to discover where your strengths lie and the areas in which you might need improvement. Your employees (and their health and wellbeing) could benefit greatly!**

## Employee Relationship Quiz

### Rating Scale:

**4** = I do this often.

**3** = I sometimes do this, but not consistently.

**2** = I do this only occasionally.

**1** = I don't do this at all.

- I take time up front to describe projects and tasks and set parameters with employees so they know what is expected and why.
- I give my employees positive reinforcement and praise.
- My employees receive clear, honest feedback and coaching.
- Once my employees know the desired results, I get out of their way and let them have freedom to do their jobs.
- I give my employees "face time," both one-on-one and in team meetings.
- If one of my employees gets off track or makes a mistake, I use it as a teaching opportunity.
- I share information freely with my staff and encourage open dialogue and participation.
- I don't blame or use guilt, threats or other demeaning tactics.
- I don't hide behind bureaucracy or policies. I try to get things done quickly and effectively.
- I don't make decisions that impact my team without including them in the process.
- I spend more time with the good performers than the poor ones.
- I address poor performance and make sure that the individual has a clear plan for improvement.
- I don't overload good performers to the point of burnout.
- I take time to find out every employee's career and job goals and encourage them to work on tasks and projects that will stretch them toward those goals.
- I try new ideas, whether they are mine or come from someone else.
- I reward healthy risk taking and I'm careful not to demean good effort.
- I seek input from my employees on ways I can improve as a leader.
- I enjoy giving my employees visibility and sharing credit with them.
- I spend more time working with people than working on paperwork.
- I treat all my employees with respect and dignity.
- I encourage a sense of community in my work unit.

In addition to filling out this questionnaire yourself, ask your employees to provide input as well. You'll likely come away with some valuable information, and you'll be on the road to becoming a better leader just by asking.

### Here are some ideas on what to do with your scores:

Congratulations on your 4s! Zero in on your 2s and 3s, and choose one or two to improve upon that you think will make the most difference to your employees. If you do have some 1s, pick one that needs to be improved immediately. Jot down an action plan and put it where you'll see it every day (a post-it note in your calendar or on your computer will keep it front and center). Then make a concerted effort to change that particular behavior.

*Source: Joan Lloyd & Associates. Joan Lloyd is a Milwaukee-based executive coach and organizational and leadership development strategist who helps leaders and their teams achieve measurable, lasting improvements. Joan Lloyd & Associates specializes in leadership development, organizational change and teambuilding, providing executive, CEO and team coaching, 360-degree feedback processes, customized training (on leadership, presentation, internal consulting and facilitation skills), team conflict resolution and retreat facilitation. [www.joanlloyd.com](http://www.joanlloyd.com)*