Let's Talk

WINTER 2010

HEALTHY BODIES | SOUND MINDS | A SAFE PLACE TO WORK

NOD IF YOU CAN HEAR ME

Active listening improves productivity

IN OUR WIRED WORKPLACE, communication is an anytime/anyplace convenience; however there may be a downside in this age of uber-connectedness – the breakdown of genuine interpersonal relations.

No longer tethered to mouse or phone, employees conduct business into wireless headsets, free to make copies or grab a cup of coffee. These fully-connected employees are faster, better, stronger communicators. Or are they?

Now, communications are virtually (and literally) uninterruptible and evolving faster than organizational culture can adapt. Some meetings have morphed into groupings of minimally-engaged, downward-gazing employees; busy hands scrolling or tapping in their laps. To minimize "device distraction," some agencies insist attendees "park" mobile devices in baskets. Clearly, there is burgeoning awareness that reliance on electronic "conveniences" can impact communications negatively.

Picture this all too common situation: During a business discussion, your colleague checks the computer each time it *dings* to signal new e-mail and even replies to some, while continual vibrations from cell or Blackberry trigger the inevitable *grab-press-squint-scroll*. And who hasn't realized with frustration that the staccato clicking on the line meant the other party was typing rather than attending to a telephone call?

Knowing that such behavior is intended to be more productive doesn't help. The result is usually counterproductive because it diminishes collaboration and detracts from a task that requires one's full attention: **listening**.

Listening is a skill and it takes practice. Successful listening requires the ability to

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YOGA-BASED TREATMENTS BEAT STRESS

PROLONGED STRESS places the body into physiological overdrive. The muscles tense, the heart races, and breathing becomes rapid and shallow. Over time, the body secretes hormones that elevate blood sugar and cholesterol, as well as blood pressure. To combat stress and relieve anxiety, people sometimes turn to medication. But the physical symptoms of stress can also be managed with exercise—in particular, with yoga.

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FEDERAL OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH (FOH)

The Occupational Health Provider of Choice for the Federal Government

FOH's mission, improving the health, safety, and productivity of our Federal employees, is our priority. Created by Congress in 1946, FOH is a non-appropriated service agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). FOH offers a full range of occupational health services—including Clinical, Wellness/Fitness, Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Work/Life, Organizational Development, and Environmental Health and Safety programs— exclusively to federal employees.

The SCOOP

Coming Soon: Healthy People 2020

Every 10 years, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) releases a comprehensive listing of national health promotion and disease prevention objectives along with a new set of 10-year targets.

Healthy People is a coordinated effort of a consortium of agencies and organizations committed to improving the health of the nation. The proposed 2020 objectives are in the final review phase and are scheduled for release later in 2010.

You can view the objectives on the Web at www.healthypeople.gov/hp2020 and keep up with the latest information by subscribing to the Healthy People listserv at www.healthypeople.gov/Contact/default.htm#listserv.

Soft water: Hard on germs

Washing chicken skin using soft water removes up to 37 percent more bacteria from chicken skin than hard water. Agricultural Research Service (ARS) scientists made this discovery while exploring how best to reduce contamination at poultry processing plants. Hard water has high levels of calcium and magnesium and is "softened" by reducing these minerals.

The best way to distinguish soft from hard water is the soapiness factor. Soap and toothpaste do not lather up as quickly in hard water as in soft. There are no pertinent health concerns whether your water is soft or hard. But if you have hard water and want to change, you can purchase a water filter which removes the magnesium and calcium.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Briefs, www.ars.usda.gov/IS/pr/2009/090723.htm

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Recently, the American Psychological Association (APA) has recognized yoga as a bonafide therapeutic stress reduction strategy and is exploring how best to integrate yoga with other modalities, like relaxation and biofeedback training, to help improve quality of life and reduce anxiety. Yoga is more than deep breathing and stretching, the ancient discipline improves flexibility, strength, and balance. A specialized style of meditation, yoga helps improve internal awareness by focusing on breathing, body, emotions, or thoughts.

As a natural alternative to medication, Yoga offers tools that mitigate stress and improve quality of life.

As a natural alternative to medication, yoga offers tools that mitigate stress and improve quality of life. It can also have a positive effect on blood pressure and heart rate. Practicing yoga postures increase relaxation while the inward focus and meditation enhances calm. Yoga's favorable track record prompted the Department of Defense (DoD) to first pilot, and then adopt a yoga-based Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) reduction program utilizing a form of *Yoga Nidra.* The program, called *iRest* (Integrative Restoration), utilizes yoga, progressive relaxation, and meditation to manage negative emotions and stress.

The *iRest* program has helped veterans reduce PTSD symptoms, anxiety, and insomnia. There are now *iRes*t programs at Veterans Health Administration (VA) facilities in Miami, Chicago, and Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. as well as active duty facilities nationwide.

An excellent rehabilitation technique, yoga offers a wide range of tools and principles that can relieve stress and improve quality of life. The postures, breathing exercises, and meditation evoke mental and physical relaxation.

Stress management and other seminars are available through your FOH EAP.

Read about APA's findings at www.apa.org/monitor/2009/11/yoga.aspx.

CAN'T EAT JUST ONE?

IT'S THE QUESTION OF THE HOUR – or of the last few decades, given that the rates of obesity and diabetes are at unprecedented levels.

In his book, "The End of Overeating: Taking Control of the Insatiable American Appetite," former commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Dr. David Kessler describes what food manufacturers and chain restaurants already know: serve dishes that are high in sugar, fat, and salt and people will crave more sugar, fat, and salt. These ingredients in the right combinations hit what is called the "three points of the compass." This perfect trilogy makes foods "hyperpalatable," motivating us to continue eating long after hunger and caloric needs are satisfied.

WIRED TO EAT

Are these foods really irresistible? With cheese fries, buffalo wings, and bacon cheeseburgers around every corner, are we powerless against the awesomeness of sugar, fat, and salt? Psychological, biochemical, and environmental forces trigger powerful urges that make it difficult for many people to turn away from food– urges that, according to Dr. Kessler, are genetically programmed and were probably useful at some point in our evolutionary past, but are now out of control.

It seems we're vulnerable because people are wired to survive. And that means we'll stuff our faces when the opportunity presents itself. It also means that we pay close attention to every such opportunity which, in our All-U-Can-Eat environment, can easily tip the scales toward obesity.

In today's environmental context, encounters with food are intense and frequent. There are multiple opportunities to eat at fast food chains, convenience stores, and vending machines. People eat in cars; even work meetings are constructed around food where it's typical – even expected – to see a platter of bagels, donuts, or muffins.

Round-the-clock cues to eat promote overeating and snacking have become the norm. An over-stimulating food environment has led to what Dr. Kessler calls "conditioned hypereating," a biologically-based cue-urge-reward habit cycle where food cues lead to a cycle of overeating.

FOOD REHAB

The key to beating the cycle of conditioned hypereating lies in breaking the chain of behaviors. In essence, it means breaking a deeply held habit. Step one involves learning to pay attention to all the cues that lead to overeating. To change the pattern you must first notice the cues and the behavior that they stimulate. The next part takes a bit of planning so you can derail the habit pattern. The goal is to get out of the path of cues by engaging in competing behaviors. Try driving different routes to avoid the temptation of fast food restaurants. Ask someone else to do the grocery shopping so you're not tempted to buy off-limits foods.

Finally, develop new eating habits that are incompatible with the old ones. Start by identifying foods that you can eat in a controlled way but also enjoy. Look for foods that are satisfying but don't trigger uncontrolled eating. Also, restructure eating habits. For example, to eliminate mindless eating, have meals at the table rather than eating on the run.

Developing new eating patterns is no piece of cake but it can be done.

FEDERAL INFORMATION LINKS

Weight-Control Information Network
http://win.niddk.nih.gov

President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports
www.fitness.gov

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
www.HHS.gov

Influenza Information from CDC
www.CDC.gov/flu

NATIONAL HEALTH OBSERVANCES

March 1-31
National Nutrition Month
http://www.eatright.org/nnm

March 14-20
National Poison Prevention Week
http://www.poisonprevention.org/

April 1 – 30
National Donate Life Month
www.organdonor.gov/get_involved/donatelifemonth.htm

Mind Your MUDA

Quality Improvement Goes Lean

FEDERAL AGENCIES are thinking Lean –that is waste reduction, not weight control. Challenged by President Obama to reduce waste, some agencies are going with "Lean" improvement approaches.

The Philosophy of Lean

Lean is a mindset; a dynamic process that represents a systematic way of thinking. The Lean approach helps managers to select and use the *right* tools at the *right* time, identify relevant problems, and initiate meaningful improvements.

Essentially, the goal of Lean is to eliminate muda – Japanese for waste. Muda is any activity that **uses resources but does not create value.** Lean teaches eight areas of waste which include:

- Errors that need revision/nonstandard work.
- Effort that adds no value to the product/service.
- Steps in a process not tied to a requirement.

Another key Lean component is that **value** must be defined from a customer's point-of-view. For Federal agencies, value can be taken from strategic objectives and goals.

Mini Lean

A popular form of Lean improvement is called a **Blitz** or **Rapid Improvement Event (RIE)**. An RIE is a structured 3- to 5-day workshop to tackle small, quickly introduced changes. The RIE is actually a 3-phased process that includes a pre-work preparation phase (3 weeks) and a follow-up (3 weeks post-event) to evaluate implementation.

Critical to the success of any improvement initiative is employee participation and support. Improvement teams should include members who are involved in the process. When employees are engaged in decision making as part of Lean improvement efforts, they become stewards of the process – and the possibilities are limitless.

FOH offers seminars on communication, conflict resolutions, and teamwork. Call your EAP to find out more.

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be attentive and take in (as well as understand) what is said. Active listening includes the ability to paraphrase (to check for understanding) what was spoken. Higher order listening skills are more difficult to develop as they include the ability to suspend critical judgment and allow others to finish their thoughts.

Achieving optimal performance depends on promoting two-way communication that recognizes each employee's contribution as part of the organizational team.

FOH can help agencies develop collaborative and productive processes. FOH offers seminars on communication, conflict resolutions, and teamwork. Call your EAP to find out more.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services | Federal Occupational Health

The FOH Federal Consortium EAP provides assessment, counseling, referral, training, and consultation to Federal employees and agencies throughout the United States. For administrative details about the program, contact Jeffrey Dunlap at 301-443-7589 or e-mail at Jeffrey.Dunlap@foh.hhs.gov. To visit us on the Web, go to www.FOH4You.com.

Help is available all day, all week, all year.
800-222-0364, TTY: 888-262-7848

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Let's Talk is available electronically at www.foh.hhs.gov/eapnews.

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