

The story about health promotion and fully functioning employees in real life: Benefits and barriers

Authors: Thor Øyvind Olsen, Vice President HR Widerøe & Dorthe Rygh Hestnes, MA/ Head of HR, Widerøe

Widerøe is the largest regional airline operating in Northern Europe. Established in 1934, we proudly represent the eldest airline in Norway. We have 3000 employees working with specialized tasks in a complex operational organization. Our vision is to create opportunities amongst large and small destinations. On average, a Widerøe flight is departing or arriving every second minute. Widerøe has a solid position in the domestic market. At the same time, the airline industry is characterized by rapid changes like tougher competition, major increase of fees and taxes, increased focus on sustainable solutions, and new technology. The extensive development of the industry results in increased demands on our workers, which in turn may have negative effects on employee health, productivity and performance.

To deliver on our vision, deal with the demands, and act upon the opportunities in times of change, a key success factor is a strong leadership philosophy. We are dependent on employees who are change ready, resilient, and master the skill of job crafting, but only through leadership may these resources be realized. Since 2017, we have implemented positive psychology and strength-based leadership in collaboration with the Norwegian research-based consultancy company, MIND. In close collaboration with the top management, selected groups of leaders have received practical training on tools for promoting healthy and fully functioning employees, in addition to a project on reducing sick-leave. Qualitative interviews are now being conducted and preliminary results will be presented at the 9th ECPP.

The theoretical and empirical basis of which we gain our inspiration plays a crucial role in approving the organizational initiatives we depend on. Yet theories and models alone are not easily applied in real life. In working with sick-leave particularly, the complexity of human interaction in different contexts, tasks and relations demands flexibility and creativity. It requires the depth and courage to reach into the most vulnerable sides of being human. Sometimes, theories come short. As challenging as it may be, we believe that training a dedicated group of our leaders in soft skills with focusing on strength spotting, active listening, perspective taking and job crafting helps create change readiness in the process of promoting health, reducing sick-leave, and creating work engagement. Our paper will share insight into the benefits as well as the barriers associated with implementing the strength-based approach. Thus, our paper contributes to minor the gap between research and practice.