Belgian Health-care Ecology Turns to Positive Workplace Innovation

Image

Can this approach transform the western world's struggling health-care systems?

As the implementation of Obamacare in the U.S. continues its rocky journey, Bernard Mohr imagines how much better it could be now if even just part of a process he champions had been included in the plan's development.

"They spent a lot of time trying to create this master plan; they did not try it out in little pieces and we now see the consequences of that. It's very serious," says Bernard, cofounder of participative design and innovation consultancy, Innovation Partners International,

As health-care systems across the western world face a slew of common challenges, they're also rapidly reaching a tipping point in innovation in how they deliver care, according to Bernard. He speaks from a range of experience working with a number of health-care systems in the U.S. and abroad.

The tipping point, Bernard suggests, is being driven by a number of factors, including the increasing stress and unhappiness characterizing health-care work environments. A second factor is that the cost of health care is rapidly becoming a danger to many western countries' economic sustainability.

"And third, and I think this is the exciting part, we are now able to offer processes of collaborative design and innovation that people get excited about and that are practical and useful," Bernard says.

The process he champions is positive workplace innovation, which has been introduced with significant results in pockets of both North America and Europe's health-care systems.

Bernard's commitment to this process rises from a passion to be part of the journey of health-care systems around the world to transform themselves from the inside out, he says.

A Layperson's Introduction to Positive Workplace Innovation

Positive workplace innovation is first of all a collaborative process, Bernard says. "It's not something that is done to people, but it's something that is done with people."

Second, it's rooted in beginning with an understanding of a system's assets, capacities, hopes and aspirations, rather than what does not exist. "We begin by engaging people in identifying those things that they do care about, those things that do work, and build the innovation forward on that."

The process is also shaped by what's called sociotechnical systems thinking, particularly the notion of the importance of innovation in the organization of work. "It's more than just people feeling better about each other or talking nicely to each other." Rather, people reimagine "how things are going to work together at the level of work organization."

Finally, design thinking is a major thread in the process, most notably the focus on experimentation and "trying things out as you go along, learning in this way and evolving one's ideas rather than spending all your time trying to create a perfect idea first and then having difficulties

"Rather than having people tell them what they should be doing, (this process is about) having people within the system look at their strengths, hopes and aspirations and make changes that are going to be a benefit to them as caregivers and their patients."

He also believes everyone can be a designer, which is a key element of the positive workplace innovation approach. "Regular people who are experts in the work that they do every day can come together and, using a process that invites the best of their thinking to come out, and the best of their strengths, can effectively transform and create something that's better for everybody."

On Dec. 12, Bernard and Benny Corvers, cofounder of the Belgian management consultancy [Prepared Mind](#), will host session on positive workplace innovation in Belgium.

The session will engage about 60-80 health-care providers as well as senior leaders and educators from across Belgium's health-care system.

The Limburg Development Agency, a provincial government-funded entity that seeks to encourage innovation across a number of sectors, including healthcare, is hosting the session.

"We want to engage the health-care system in Lindberg and the Provinces of Flanders in Belgium around this topic of workplace innovation and make sure that they can tap into rich examples that we've built and see it as a starting point for them to also start experimenting in the same vein," Benny says, noting the event includes the launch of a book by himself and a colleague on the same topic.

Both Benny and Bernard have stories capturing the possibilities in positive workplace innovation, including Bernard's work in 2010 with a U.S. network representing the manufacturers and suppliers of the eye-health industry, The Vision Council.

The council was calling for innovation in creating a public service message that would result in better eye care for people. While it had long been recognized that creating this message was critical, the group had struggled for years to agree on the content and organizational framework for doing so. Much of the challenge stemmed from the diversity of the stakeholders engaged and the differing agendas each brought to the table.

Through a process of reflecting on times past when the group had been able to overcome similar hurdles, their aspirations for what they wanted to create now and the capacities they had to do so, they overcame their differences and identified a shared direction and vision.

Just as important, the council created a new organizational entity to actualize this intent. Within a year, an estimated 300,000 cases of potential blindness were averted as a result of sharing this new public service message.

Positive workplace innovation can also contribute to an organization's resilience, as a situation with a health-care provider Benny and his colleagues have worked with recently illustrates. A senior leader's sudden illness had the potential to create a major disruption within the organization.

But, "because we had involved everyone and not just senior management (in the workplace innovation process) the system ended up being much less fragile and allowed the organization to adapt themselves and take the new situation as an opportunity to reshape things," Benny says.

As Dec. 12 approaches, Benny and Bernard say they're energized by the possibility of creating an experience across organizational borders that equips people to co-create a better future.

The health-care system in Belgium and likely elsewhere is in an unprecedented and possibly finite window of time as changes in demographics, the economy and health-care create a new openness for people to "think differently, and come up with new recipes," Benny says.

"This opportunity might be gone in a couple of years, so we have to jump on it and make sure we create more enthusiasm for what we're trying to achieve," he says.

In addition to the Dec. 12 event, an interactive seminar on positive workplace innovation takes place Dec. 11 at the Irish College in Leuven.

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