

LEADERSHIP ABSTRACT
David John Schleich
009843885

The Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine
President's Office

A Healthy Life Practises Strategy for Community College
Leaders: *vis medicatrix naturae*

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There exists an abundance of dog-eared literature on the success of the community college movement in Canada and the United States. Many college leaders have contributed immensely over the past generation to the establishment of a remarkable network of college systems. This has translated into much bricks and mortar, thousands of pragmatic programs, innumerable innovations in content, methodology, delivery and evaluation for adult learners, constantly transforming visions and legions of successful alumni.

The high toll success has taken on the health of college leaders

This success, however, has come at a high price for an increasing number of college leaders. Their stewardship requires steadily increasing attention to the sheer volume of activity. Coupled with the perennial and incremental drain of declining funding, exploding demand, aging staff, deteriorating physical plant and equipment, accumulating entitlements, the unrelenting impact of Information Technology, a metamorphosing student body, growing private and shadow sector competition, and the remarkable shift in knowledge and skills, a sustained assault on the well-being of thousands of college deans, chairs, co-ordinators and department heads, not to mention Vice-Presidents, Provosts and Deans has been underway for decades.

A comprehensive, integrated strategy for wellness is urgently needed

Among the many challenges college leaders face, perhaps one of the most frequently overlooked is the urgent need for a systematic, sensitive program to promote lifelong wellness. Wellness encompasses physical, emotional, spiritual and economic well-being. Primary health care practitioners insist that these four dimensions need to be interconnected in order to introduce and sustain healthy life practises among community college leaders. For them to thrive within an environment whose demands on their energy, time and privacy constitute prolonged overload, a comprehensive, integrated strategy is urgently needed. Where portions of such a strategy exist, they tend to be marginal at best and principally linked to allopathic and mainstream medical models. Even articles in collective agreements underwrite sick days and leaves of absence, largely ignoring prevention and self-responsibility in health.

College systems have historically championed training to deal with important priorities

The importance of training for college chairs, for example, has been well documented [Leadership Abstract Vol. 5, No. 1, January 1992] and the impossibility of a college president's job has been declared cogently [Leadership Abstract Vol. 1, No. 16, September 1988]. As well, much attention has been paid to considering the political and governance influences on community college leadership [Leadership Abstracts Vol. 1, No. 20, November 1988; Vol. 5, No. 5, May 1992; Vol. 5, No. 4, April 1999 ... to name a few]. However, very little has been written about the overall wellness quotients of college leaders, apart from numerous studies linked to stress. There are numerous M.Ed. and doctoral theses waiting to be written about how the health of educational leaders impacts on their colleges.

The need for a healthy life practises focus for college leaders has never been greater

Increasingly, college leaders and their people report a growing frequency of absences occasioned by illness and characterized by, for example, more frequent bouts of flu, allergy reactions, gastro-intestinal distress, cancer and inflammatory diseases. The steadily increasing costs of short and long term disability, sick leave entitlement, early retirements and staff replacement make this aspect of college human resources planning a very hot topic. Chief among the patterns observed are poor eating habits, lack of consistent exercise, excess weight, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease, to name a few. Researchers also point out how repeated experiences of thanklessness and the *merely surviving* the political/social tensions in their environments have tended over time to undermine their effectiveness, their focus and their satisfaction levels. In colleges where there is evidence of burnout or of leaders circling their wagons repeatedly, the urgent need for a commitment to **healthy life practises** which can be genuinely integrated into the working and learning lives of the college family, including faculty, support staff and student leaders, is majorly overdue.

College physical environments have a long way to go to become healthy places to work

The environments of many colleges are less than conducive to health life practises. Frequent complaints about air quality, outgassing from toxic materials such as carpet, paint, and old HVAC systems are accompanied by a flood of disability claims for such conditions as Fibromyalgia and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. There is no widespread commitment to healthy eating habits within the food services operations of community colleges, for example. Cafeterias are replete with high carbohydrate, high sugar and high fat based foods and drinks. High profit margins and a lifetime of poor eating choices collaborate to perpetuate these unhealthy life practises.

Emotional wellness is also a factor in the gathering storm

Emotional well-being is also a factor. The antagonistic dimensions of employer/employee relations among the principle parties, students, teachers, support staff and managers take a toll on the alacrity of the leader. Spiritual wellness is compromised by the need for the individual leader always to be “on”, often to be at the receiving end of projected group and individual conflict and a culture of eclectic blindsiding. Issues in economic well-being add to the recipe for an accumulating wellness disaster. For example, there is very little difference between faculty and administrators’ salaries. Meanwhile, the perceived unfairness of this material differentiation is compounded by disproportionate accountabilities and vacation entitlements. Such observations, though, do not account for the very real statistic that faculty and support staff are experiencing health problems at a rate comparable to managers and leaders who breathe the same air and eat the same french fries in the cafeteria.

Powerful society variables contribute to the problem

Within this morass of accumulating wellness issues, there are powerful societal variables which operate alongside institutional and college system pressures driving the need to create a comprehensive **healthy life practices strategy**. Among college leaders, for example, there are

significant numbers of two-income families for whom the conflicting demands of work and personal life are a daily reality. Increased longevity and the concomitant obligations of long-distance caregiving of elderly parents are yet another item on the college leader's to do lists. Back-up child care is still a part of many leaders' lives, particularly among those whose boomer career paths included becoming parents in their early to mid-thirties, the resulting youngsters still very much present in the daily home schedules of freshly minted co-ordinators, chairs and department heads.

A litany of ailments accompanies our aging leaders

Further, as our leaders age, so arrives a litany of ailments ranging from chronic fatigue syndrome and late onset diabetes to chronic degenerative conditions such as Parkinson's Disease and Multiple Sclerosis. Another condition not well understood is chronic imbalance, prevalent among leaders who often experience emotional highs and lows which do not match a particular situation in which they find themselves. Because the prevalence of these kinds of physical and emotional health problems is growing, college leaders are having to look beyond the symptoms to the underlying causes of unwellness in themselves and in their workplaces. Stymied by the disconnect between the agenda they ace and the values and personal resources they have available, unwell leaders gradually experience a dissipation of their energy, their resolve, and their fun on the job.

Flabby and unresponsive

Strategically flabby and uncharacteristically inactive on these fronts, college systems have not been powerful advocates for the health of their people, particularly their managers. Leaders with a long view, though, are coming to terms with the idea that improving their own health may be step one in getting behind the indisputable humanistic value-added dimension of developing a healthy life practises strategy. There are far better uses to college dollars than merely to repair, in the form of sick leave entitlements, for example, the damage of avoidable illnesses after they have occurred.

Work/life benefits: a step in the right direction

There are a number of healthy life practises which individual colleges or entire systems could embrace by refocusing healthcare dollars. *Work/life benefits* for example, could be installed as essential components of total compensation packages. The promotion of good mental and physical health of employees and their families could range from early health problem identification through to incentives that generate desired lifelong wellness behaviours and commitment to self-responsibility for health. Such *work/life benefits* could include discounted arrangements at fitness centres or similar programs right on campus; dependent care programs which would include various forms of financial support, expanded health care coverage for dependents, and expanded referral services.

There are numerous creative ways to install such work/life benefits. Allowing employees to use their own sick time when dependents are sick is one example. Another dimension of wellness has to do with leaders being mandated to make time for work and life. Flexibility in terms of where and when employees work, flexibility in schedules, and telecommuting can be seen in terms of the college attempting to extend the definition of work/life to embrace work, family, and the community in one

continuum. Carol Greenfield [Compensation and Benefits Management, Autumn 1997] has even proposed a remarkable instrument called “life cycle accounts” in which the college leader, allocated a fixed amount [say \$10K] to be drawn against with eligible expenses such as child and elder care, home purchase, computer purchase, dependent tuition, and financial planning.

The spiritual fabric

There is, too, a spiritual fabric which can be woven into this package of wellness support for college leaders. The experienced educational leader knows that when vision and energy are informed by values which are held sacred, a spiritual leadership can emerge that is quite distinct from a religious dimension per se, but can energize and assist in the continuous renewal so essential to enduring leadership qualities.

A healthy life practises strategy, however and whenever designed, might include such program categories as *nutritional health and fitness, environmental health, mental and emotional health, substance use and abuse, and a personal plan for healthy living*. There are numerous strategies which, in turn can be incorporated into an overall program of wellness. Colleges could offer regular information sessions and workshops on stress management, relaxation, visual imagery, biofeedback, cognitive restructuring, nutrition, and bodywork. Further, our instructions could budget for and encourage participation in regular programs of fitness and wellness supported by qualified naturopathic and medical practitioners.

Great uncomplicated ideas

Great ideas are usually uncomplicated. Krs Edstrom in her study of successful business leaders reports their uncommonly good health. The patterns which emerged from her study include these least common denominators of a wellness strategy: *conformable but sensible diets, routine exercise habits, a positive outlook, humour, and a sense of self-worth*. In a time of uncommon stress and unrelenting demands on time and energy, a formula for thrival which links health and success intimately is a winning one.

Such a wellness strategy would not simply be about generating good numbers related to percentage of body fat, serum cholesterol level or blood pressure. It would be about acknowledging in the very way the college leader is expected to conduct his or her day, week, semester or year, the central place daily health has in that day to day regimen. The great majority of deaths under age 65 are preventable because their five top causes are lifestyle related. Our college leaders experience more and more cognitive and non-cognitive stress with the accompanying back pain and heart attacks, for example, than would be likely if a conscientiously applied program of wellness were part of their daily experience.

It hurts my motor to go slow

James Taylor’s lyric, “It hurts my motor to go slow” may well apply to the high octane leaders in the colleges, whose schedules will rarely permit taking care of the self. Whether a program consists of *vipassana meditation* [also known as insight meditation], breathing exercises, or tailoring workouts

to fit into the spaces left in a well-used daytimer, there has never been a greater need than now to address the emerging epidemic of lifestyle related health problems among college leaders. What it would take is a concerted effort on the part of the appropriate provincial ministry to mandate healthy life practises as part of the college culture. Subsidies could be provided, for example, to promote nutritious food availability and modeling on our campuses. Every college health centre could include a naturopathic doctor whose treatment protocols are focused on the body's innate wisdom and ability to heal itself: *vis medicatrix naturae*. The accompanying expectation that the student or staff member who visits the health centre and meets a naturopathic doctor will gradually adopt a greater responsibility for his or her health and wellness and rely less and less on magic bullet pharmaceuticals.

It's a simple change, but it changes everything

In the fuss and rattle of leading the divisions of our great colleges, of leading the entire college itself, there is very little time to focus on the individual wellness of the very leaders who are steering the ship. In fact, the personal wellness of the individuals who control the rudder, is in large measure up to them. The corporate culture in which they work is slightly embarrassed to acknowledge that its leaders are susceptible to long term health problems. The financial exposure appears to be too great a risk.

In fact, a conscientiously designed program of healthy life practises would return benefits quickly. Leaders within such a culture would not only have fewer sick days per square minute, they would also have more energy when they were on task, and more enthusiasm to inject into projects which are the lifeblood of the burgeoning community college movement.

For further information, please contact:
David John Schleich
President
Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine
Telephone: (416) 486-8584 ext. 234
E-mail: dschleich@ccnm.edu