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MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE: FOSTERING A POSITIVE CULTURE

Maintaining or changing the culture of the work environment to one that employees appreciate spending time in requires continuous effort.[1] Unfortunately, almost a third (29%) of employees across both blue and white-collar industries view poor company culture as a factor that is preventing mental health initiatives taking place where they work.[2]

In this guide we focus on how employers may seek to mould culture and support general mental health, by suggesting some strategies that may be tailored to specific business needs.

Address the emotional needs of your employees

Building a positive workplace culture can have a powerful impact on an individual's holistic wellbeing.[3] Employers can help address the emotional needs of their people by encouraging open conversations, and developing strategies and processes that work to address any areas of improvement within the workplace's culture – spanning staff morale and engagement, co-worker respect, staff retention, service quality and outcomes, trust in management, and the perception of workload.

Encouraging a cultural shift

When looking at ways to improve culture, it is important for workplaces to identify key employees, units, or groups that are displaying, or are receptive to, a positive work culture. To spread the cultural change, employers may need to create shared experiences between those that are receptive and those that are resistant. This can be achieved through joint committees or projects, hybrid teams, or by altered rostering.[4]

Employers can also encourage a shift in culture by celebrating small wins regularly. This can be done by tracking and evaluating responses to surveys or using public acknowledgement such as employee of the month. Employers could also consider changing categories of awards to recognise employees who display values and behaviours important to the culture or implement new meeting formats that recognise individual and team success.[5]

Employee check-ins, which can consist of one-on-one catch ups, are another way to recognise small wins or celebrate an employee adding value to company culture. In the *Allianz Future Thriving Workplaces* report, over a third (34%) of employees would like employee check-ins introduced in their workplaces in the future as a means of properly addressing mental health.[6] Those in the education sector were particularly eager to see this mental health initiative introduced, with 32 per cent of workers indicating they'd like this implemented in the future.[7]

Mindfulness training for leaders, such as meditation, can also encourage better teamwork and shared decision making, effective responses to high stress situations, increased empathy, and also foster appropriate and tactful communication across the business.[7] Many employers in the *Allianz Future Thriving Workplaces* report are implementing mental health awareness training since the COVID-19 outbreak as an effective means of addressing mental health at work.[9]

Preventing bullying and harassment

One of the leading causes of psychological injury in the workplace is bullying and harassment, with a quarter (24%) of workers surveyed by Allianz reporting that one of these has negatively impacted their mental health at work.[10] The medical, tourism and hospitality sectors need to be particularly conscious of workplace bullying and harassment, as the *Allianz Future Thriving Workplaces* report revealed that three in ten of these workers felt one of these have impacted their mental health.[11]

To encourage a positive working environment, it is important employers have a specific policy to address bullying or harassment at work. An unclear or inadequate code of conduct can leave employees unsure of how to deal with bullying behaviours, and other employees may be unaware that their words or actions could be offensive.[12]

Combating stigma

Employers have a role to play in creating a positive workplace culture where people feel confident talking about how they are feeling. However, stigma towards mental health in the workplace continues to be a key contributor to poor organisational culture. This is the case across all sectors, with the latest Allianz research indicating three in ten employees working across finance, construction, information technology, retail, tourism, hospitality, transport and travel feel that stigma is a barrier to workplace mental health initiatives.[13]

If stigma exists in the workplace or worksite, this can lead to the underutilisation of mental health services already offered, such as the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or workplace counselling. To increase the effectiveness of these resources, employers can help break down barriers by starting a dialogue and creating an environment where discussions around mental ill-health are encouraged. Education on common mental health issues can foster supportive behaviour amongst colleagues, or alternatively encourage employees to become mental health advocates.[14]

If an employer has the available resources, it can be useful to provide varied options for self-managed coping strategies such as resilience training, as well as a formal support service. Male-dominated occupations are more likely to have stigma as a factor in mental health problems and discreet support may be required.

Addressing absenteeism

Absenteeism can be a way for unwell workers to escape perceived workplace issues. Negative attitudes towards mental illness may perpetuate absenteeism in the employees who are experiencing mental illness, and this is harmful in the long-term, given these affected employees should instead be reaching out for support.[15]

Along with monitoring absenteeism or sick leave rates, employers can also identify substandard culture within the workplace by reviewing internal and external complaint rates and addressing high turnover of staff.

Employers should seek direct, open, and honest communication with all employees to understand their views on the conditions contributing to substandard culture and mental ill-health at work. Depending on the business or organisation structure, employers may consider requesting appropriate feedback through open-ended surveys, focus groups or interviews.

A checklist to build a positive workplace culture

For employers:

› Use metrics available within your organisation to get a pulse check on your workplace culture to identify areas for improvement.

› Ensure that your organisation has a strong workplace policy on bullying and harassment.

› Review how your organisation's culture impacts employees' decisions to lead healthy lifestyles. For more information see our *Mental Health in the Workplace: Promoting Exercise and Healthy Habits* guide.

› Review your organisation's culture strategy and consider utilising available mental health resources from government, not-for-profit organisations and mental health specialists. For more information see our *Mental Health in the Workplace: Designing a Collaborative Mental, Wellbeing Program* guide.

For employees:

› Do not let suspected workplace bullying continue unreported. Such behaviour should not be overlooked.

› Create opportunities to talk about non-work-related issues, like International Women's Day or Australian Citizenship Day. This helps co-workers learn more about each other and celebrate their stories beyond their work title and role.

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