

## The keys to a psychologically healthy workplace



One in five Australians reports a mental health issue. But how many more simply don't talk about it?

If it's one in five of us who are experiencing a mental health issue, at a minimum, we need to start considering the impact that it's having on our businesses. The cost of mental health issues to the economy was projected to be \$60 billion in 2020, and that was before COVID-19.

One of the biggest misconceptions about where the value is being lost is in believing that absenteeism is the problem. In actual fact, the impact comes from presenteeism. The lights are on, but no one's home.

As business owners, what are we doing? We're super switched on, we're super busy. And we're not actually checking in with our people. There are five ways we can change this cycle and create a healthier workplace for us and our people.

First, we need to understand that conflict can trigger underlying negative beliefs in our staff. If you have a conflict with a staff member, it's important to remember that you have a window of opportunity of six hours following it. If you intervene with your staff member and diffuse the situation in that first six hours when there's a problem, you're actually going to keep them engaged. It will make them feel validated and listened to, and they're going to stay at work.

Next, we need to educate. Help your staff understand what it is to have mental health issues going on in the workplace. It's critical to validate your people's experience, even if things happened that you didn't want to happen. It's not about, he said, she said, I believe this person and not that person. It's about the actual problem and putting the problem in focus. Try to work together to resolve the mutual problem.

It's also important to remember that emotion vibrates. When you walk into a room and people are upbeat and energetic, you feel it. Make sure that you are creating a work environment that has the energy levels you want your people to have. When you're all feeling pressured and you have deadlines, use music to adjust the mood and set alarms to remind each other to have a small "brain break" – tell a joke or do some deep breathing. Being open about the pressure is important, but we want to shift the energy from a focus on the threat of potential failure to focussing on the joy of success.

The final key to ensuring your workplace is healthy is to introduce storytelling. Storytelling is important because it facilitates emotional processing. If you feel unheard at work, you're more likely to complain about your experience to family and friends. It's important to give your staff an opportunity to be heard at least once a month. Set-up a 15 minute "Walk n Talk" meeting – structure it to focus it on their three things – biggest frustration, best achievement and gratitude for a colleague.

Five minutes on each with some guided open questions and your staff will feel heard, appreciated and connected. Allowing emotions to come up as we walk actually reduces the feeling and changes the way our brain stores the negative experiences, in a way that doesn't happen if we just talk over coffee.

By managing conflict, educating our staff on mental health, validating their experiences, setting the bar for energy in the workplace and ensuring your people feel heard, you will build trust, honesty and create an environment in which they feel valued.

*Kerry Howard, Psychologist and Founding Director of PsychNEXUS*