

Bosses can shape the work cultures that influence mental health

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The ways in which work affects our mental health and wellbeing are complex and varied. What research consistently reveals is that work can be immensely beneficial but also harmful to our mental health, and in turn to our physical wellbeing and quality of life.

Safe Work Australia reports that each year about “7200 Australians are compensated for work-related mental health conditions, equating to around 6 per cent of workers compensation claims”.

According to the Black Dog Institute, “mental illness is now the leading cause of sickness ab-

sence and long-term work incapacity in the developed world”.

Creating a healthy workplace culture is essential to any organisation’s ability to provide not only a safe work environment but also one in which people are able to thrive and perform at their best. Employers are wise to recognise the influence culture has on mental health and, in turn, attendance, engagement, productivity and ultimately the standard of performance achieved.

Healthy workplace cultures are built on the foundations of trust and respect.

Recognising and having due respect for the right of every member of your team to be safe at work, physically, mentally and

emotionally, is a critical starting point. From there, what matters most is that you turn words into action.

Building a workplace culture that is good for mental health takes genuine commitment.

All too often leaders espouse cultural values that they fail to adopt. All too often human resources departments struggle to execute effective culture change programs, largely because leaders fail to take responsibility for the work environment.

How leaders think and behave has the greatest influence on how people experience work, and subsequently their mental health. Some of the most common causes of workplace stress that leaders

have the power to influence include unreasonable workload demands, poor organisational change management, and a lack of fair recognition and reward for effort.

Bullying, discrimination and harassment continue to be serious issues experienced by far too many working Australians.

The Australian Human Rights Commission’s fourth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces found an alarming one in three people had experienced sexual harassment at work in the past five years. But only 17 per cent of those people made a formal report or complaint about the harassment they experienced.

Among the most important steps any leader can take are these:

- Set very clear behavioural expectations and hold yourself and every other member of your team accountable to those standards.
- Expect that people operate with a spirit of co-operation and good intention towards one another.
- Ask your team to strive to bring the best version of themselves to work and to take responsibility for having a positive influence on the mental health of their colleagues.
- Take fair but firm steps to address harmful behaviours.
- Step in when people are behaving in ways that are aggressive, volatile or generally disrespectful. If people feel the need to tiptoe

around someone, it’s definitely time to do something about it.

- Observe your own behaviour and the leadership tone you may be setting.
- Ask yourself whether your approach brings out the best in people because they feel respected and valued.
- Engage in honest conversations with people who behave badly. While it can take courage to stand up to a bully, even if you are their manager, it’s critical that every leader find the strength to voice an objection and to take the necessary steps to address harmful conduct.

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