MAINTAINING GOOD MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

How leaders choose to think and behave has the greatest influence on how people experience work, and subsequently, their mental health.

By Corporate Dojo founder Karen Gately.

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 our physical wellbeing and quality of life.

Safe Work Australia reports that each year around "7,200 Australians are compensated for work-related mental health conditions, equating to around six per cent of workers' compensation claims". According to The Black Dog institute "mental illness is now the leading cause of sickness absence 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 operate by. All too often, HR departments struggle to execute effective culture change programs, largely because leaders fail to engage and take ownership for the environment that is created by the way people are encouraged and allowed to behave.

The simple reality is how leaders choose to think and behave has the greatest influence on how people experience work, and subsequently their mental health. The example leaders set and decisions they make ultimately lead to the culture created. Common cultural drivers 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 cultural issues experienced by far too many working Australians. The Human Rights Commission's fourth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces (2018) found an alarming one in three people had experienced sexual harassment at work in the previous five years. Only 17 per cent of those people, however, 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 cooperation and good intention towards one another.
- Ask your team to strive to bring the best version of themselves to work and to take ownership for having a positive influence on the mental health of their colleagues.
- Take fair but firm steps to address harmful behaviour. 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 time to do something about it. Observe your own behaviours 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 at times take courage to stand up to a bully, even if you are their manager, it's critical that every leader finds the strength to voice objection and take necessary steps to redress harmful conduct.

About Karen Gately

Karen is a leadership and people-management specialist and the founder of Corporate Dojo. She works with leaders and HR teams to drive business results through the talent and energy of people. She is the author of *The People Manager's Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Getting the Best from People* and *The Corporate Dojo: Driving Extraordinary Results Through Spirited People*. For more information visit www.corporatedojo.com or contact info@corporatedojo.com.

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