THE CATALYST

Envisioning the future of workplace mental health

Psychologically safe workplaces demand more than lip service: Flexibility and trust matter.

By: Yvette Murray | Posted: October 27, 2022

A popular quote by Wayne Dyer goes “If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change”. Perhaps changing the way we look at what constitutes a healthy workplace may change the fact that psychological health problems are costing the Canadian economy around $51 billion per year, $20 billion of which results from work-related causes.

Recent events have highlighted the need for change in how we do business, manage operations, and provide psychological safe space for the workforce. What we perceived as “working” before, it would seem, is no longer working.

Creating and fostering a psychologically safe workplace can feel scary. Change can feel like that. A psychologically safe workplace is one where every reasonable effort is made to prevent harm to mental health through negligent, reckless, or deliberate conduct. The National Standard of Canada has 13 Psychological Factors for Psychological Health and Safety in The Workplace. At this point, its a voluntary standard, however I believe that it will become a requirement, such as having the standard of Emergency First Aid trained individuals in workplaces.

I’ll share with you some observations and ideas on how to nurture a psychologically safe workplace. Some guidance for both the employer AND employee- yes, it’s a team effort.

Reducing Stigma

We all have mental health just like we all have physical health. Our degree of mental and/or physical health can change based on many factors. Mental health does not discriminate. In the Mental Health First Aid certification course, we share a video of managers and staff in the workforce sharing their self-stigma around having a mental health problem, illness and/or crisis. It helps people to understand that it is possible to be a leader or a good employee despite living with a mental health disorder. One participant was surprised after watching the video, recognizing that she used to work with someone in that video. She shared that if she had known what that person was experiencing, it would have changed the way they interacted, the dynamic of their challenging relationship and would have helped the participant with her own decline in mental well-being. The more open we are to talking about our experiences, the less stigma for those living with a mental health disorder. You never know who you may be helping.

Looking back at my life, I can recall situations in the workplace, and thinking no wonder I felt that way and/or reacted that way. Being aware of the signs/ symptoms of a mental well-being decline for yourself and others provides the opportunity for support in recovery, yes, even at work.

The Human Leader

Leaders are only human after all and are not immune to having real human challenges, just like anyone. In a leadership role, the demands of managing performance, operations, productivity, and results are only compounded by the challenges of being responsible for teams and people. The side effects of those challenges can have a human impact too, emotions, stress, anxiety, cognitive behaviour, to name a few. One person in a leadership role spoke to their experience of anxiety; “I have anxiety and I’m not ashamed of it. When I feel the symptoms of anxiety, I know what I need to do to encourage calm”. They also went on to say, “with the proper tools and support systems, someone living with a mental health disorder can work in a leadership role”. The Manager’s Toolkit created by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, offers managers a range of practical strategies and examples to support mental health and well-being for their onsite and remote teams — and for themselves.

Should I Stay or Go Now

I’ve worked with several companies over the past few months that have shared their concerns that come with the expectation of employees to return to work on location. Some companies have “put their foot down” and mandated a return to work on site. As a result, staff may choose to go elsewhere and/or it can create an unhealthy working environment.

An executive who still works from home shared with me that having the option to work from home provides them the opportunity for a better work/homelife balance. Trust is required that the workload gets done, however with the flexibility, the employee can balance work, family, and life in a more productive flow. Recently, employers are becoming more open to providing autonomy, understanding that the marker is, whether at home or on site that the work gets done.

Job Demands

Companies are now including a list of physical, cognitive, and psychological demands in their job descriptions. This provides the opportunity for the potential employee to be aware of what the demands are and whether they feel it’s a fit for them – no surprises. Perhaps the most notable of the many demands in this evolving world of work is the need for emotional intelligence, the ability to develop and maintain good relationships, communicate clearly, influence others, work well in a team, and manage conflict. Abilities and skills that come hand-in-hand with self-awareness, balance, wellness, and good mental health.

Boundaries

Getting clarity on your own boundaries is integral to a psychologically safe workplace. Be aware and know where you begin and where you end with respect to your boundaries for time, physical, personal, relationship, and so on. A formula that has worked well in my life is this: awareness,+ accepting + action= change. Before we can make any change, we need to be aware of what we are doing, choosing a different action equals change.

For example, you are on a major deadline, time is of the essence and a co-worker comes into the office and starts to tell you about their “horrible” weekend. You stop what you are doing and listen. All the while, your pulse is elevated, and you are stressing about how you are going to get this project done on time with this delay. You really aren’t listening. Having clear boundaries may sound like this, “I’d love to hear about your weekend, however I’m just in the middle of this project that is due. Is there another time we can connect when I can be more focused on you?”

What if you are that person who wants to share about the “horrible” weekend. Having someone to vent to can be helpful. Perhaps approaching the person like this, “I just had a horrible weekend, I could really use an ear. Do you have the emotional space and is this a good time for me to share with you about my experiences this past weekend?”

Maintaining boundaries helps manage resentments, frustrations, and hurt feelings that can snowball into discourse and create an unhealthy work environment.

“When you say ‘yes’ to others, make sure you’re not saying ‘no’ to yourself.”- Paulo Coelho

Author: Yvette Murray

Lives in Tiny Beaches on Georgian Bay, which she considers her sanctuary. She believes that being surrounded by nature does wonders for her mental health. Yvette is the author of The Mental Health Contagion: Navigating Yourself Through a Loved One’s Mental Well-Being Decline (forthcoming). Yvette is a mental health advocate, influencer, and keynote speaker; a psychotherapist; and a facilitator for the MHCC’s Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) virtual certification program. MHFA is available for those who are supporting adults, youth, and/or older adults. It trains participants on how to recognize a loved one’s mental health problem, have that conversation, and get the best help.

Mental Health Commission of Canada
https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/
350 Albert Street, Suite 1210 Ottawa ON K1R 1A4
Tel: 613.683.3755 | Fax: 613.798.2989
mhccinfo@mentalhealthcommission.ca