12.3 Creating a Safe and Healthy Workplace

Defining Psychological Health and Safety

Originally coined by Dr. Amy Edmonson, a professor at Harvard Business School, the term refers to "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking."

A psychologically safe and healthy workplace is one where employees feel seen, heard, valued, and respected. It's an environment that actively fosters the mental wellbeing of its employees and works to prevent any harm resulting from things like poor policies, procedures, and bad or unskilled managers. It's about preventing risk of injury to psychological wellbeing.

When psychological safety is high, people take more ownership and extend more effort, resulting in more innovation, creative conversations, and higher engagement. When it is low, employees are less likely to share different perspectives and withdraw. And, importantly, they are less likely to share if they are experiencing a mental health challenge.

In short, psychological safety helps to foster good employee mental health within the workplace.

Psychological safety is an important part of successful organizations. A 2015 Google study found that they were the most important factors in team effectiveness. So psychological safety is not just good for people, it's also good for business.

The National Standard on Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace

In 2013 the National Standard on Psychological Health and safety in the Workplace (the Standard) was launched by the Mental Health Commission of Canada. A voluntary standard, it is the only one of its kind in the world. It contains tools and resources to support employers – and employees – to foster safe and healthy workplaces.

The Standard contains 13 psychosocial factors that impact the level of psychological health and safety within a workplace, and directly impact employee mental health and wellbeing:

1. Organizational Culture

2. Psychological and Social Support

3. Clear Leadership & Expectations

4. Civility & Respect

5. Psychological Demands

6. Growth & Development

7. Recognition & Reward

8. Involvement & Influence

9. Workload Management

10. Engagement

11. Balance

12. Psychological Protection

13. Protection of Physical Safety

What Organizations/Leaders Can Do to Create Safe and Healthy Workplaces

Mind Share Partners' 2019 Mental Health at Work Report shows that the most common tools, resources and supports employees want to see are:

- Mental health training

- Easily available information about mental health resources

- A more open and supportive culture for mental health in the workplace

As a manager, your most important job is building and leading an effective team. Focusing on psychological safety will help you do that. Here are five places to start:

1. Develop your emotional intelligence (EQ).

Leaders with a high EQ – self-awareness of others and themselves and a sense of empathy – have strong, more cohesive teams. They are better able to notice changes in their employees, whether those are signs of burn out or more serious mental health conditions.

2. Normalize the topic of mental health.

Talking about mental health and wellbeing on a regular basis (not just during difficult or challenging times) sends a message that you and the organization value and prioritize mental health as much as physical health.

3. Use inclusive language.

The language that we use send an important message to those around us. Using mental illnesses as adjectives ("the weather is so bipolar today" "that's so mental" "I am so depressed that my favorite show ended") is a form of microaggression and can make people feel excluded and less valued. It also feeds stigma.

4. **Model the behaviors that you want to see in employees.**

It's important to talk about mentally healthy practices in the workplace but it's even more important to model them. Take your breaks and vacation time, don't send emails after work hours, and carve out intentional time for fun at work.

5. Adopt the Standard.

You don't have to do it all or all at once. But adopting elements of the Standard will help your workplace to move towards becoming as safe and healthy as possible. There are many resources available to support you along that path.

What Employees Can Do to Create Safe and Healthy Workplaces

Creating a psychologically safe and healthy workplace is not the sole responsibility of the employer or manager; employees have a role to play, too. Here are things that employees can do to foster a mentally safe and healthy workplace:

- Educate themselves about mental health and challenge their (and others') unconscious bias about mental illness.

- Adopt healthy habits and take responsibility for their mental and physical health.

- Support colleagues who are struggling with challenges in work and life.

- Participate in employer initiatives that support positive mental health outcomes.

Sources:

[1] *Rozovsky, J. (2015, November 17). The five keys to a successful Google team. Retrieved from re:Work - The five keys to a successful Google team (rework.withgoogle.com)*

[2] *Mental Health Commission of Canada, National Standard on Psychological Health and safety in the Workplace. Retrieved from National Standard | Mental Health Commission of Canada*

[3] *Samra, J., Gilbert, M., Shain M., Bilsker, D., Simon Fraser University. (2009-2020). Know the Psychosocial Factors. Retrieved from Guarding Minds at Work*

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