Leading for better mental health pilot

The Emergency Services Foundation has been funded for two years by WorkSafe WorkWell to Chair a Learning Network which has two aims.

1. To bring emergency management organisations together to share resources and experiences about how to improve mental health and wellbeing across the sector.
2. To collaboratively develop an innovative pilot that utilises best-practice evidence to respond to sector gaps including the need to tackle the work-related factors that influence workplace mental health and wellbeing.

Over recent months, the Learning Network Chair, Siusan MacKenzie and Project Manager, Dr. Sarah Hewat, have facilitated discussion with the Learning Network [wellbeing managers from each Victorian emergency management organisation] around the work-related factors that affect mental health and wellbeing across the sector. Based on these conversations, data gathering and research a pilot to improve how frontline leaders are developed so they can lead for better mental health and wellbeing is proposed.

Why frontline leaders

People often equate leadership with the Executive Team. But frontline leaders - the middle managers who directly supervise employees and volunteers - can have a huge impact on performance because they have the most direct influence on the day-to-day experience of people. Frontline leaders are particularly critical in implementing large cultural improvement initiatives such as in mental health and wellbeing, where even the best-intended programs will fail if they do not have the right support at all levels.

Unfortunately, that support does not always happen. Our research revealed that front line leaders are looking for support to help them effectively nurture psychologically safe work environments.

Even when the executive team is fully committed, employees working under a less-than-committed direct manager are far less likely to feel supported and safe to raise wellbeing concerns. In short, getting frontline leaders to better understand and support mental health and wellbeing is a huge opportunity for every organisation in the sector.

The overlooked potential of frontline leaders

Senior executives may get all the glory in terms of leadership - and certainly they make critical strategic choices and set the tone at the top regarding mental health and wellbeing - but for most employees and volunteers those executives are many levels away in the organisational structure and have little impact on their daily work experience. In contrast, frontline leaders interact with their team every day and are the most immediate role models. They also have significant power to implement, ignore, or actively undermine efforts to improve mental health and wellbeing.

Most such leaders are in their first or second leadership role, having been promoted to a role in which they now supervise people -advancing from 'doing' to 'leading.' In many instances they need structured support, training, and development in how to be an effective leader. Yet while leaders at this level make up or influence the vast majority of a company's workforce, they often receive inadequate attention in training.

Pilot concept

This pilot concept has been endorsed by the ESF Stakeholder Council which includes the heads of agency of 12 Victorian emergency management organisations.

Hypothesis

That by participating in innovative, evidence-based, and best practice development, frontline leaders will be more confident and competent to address complex leadership challenges and identify organisational barriers associated with enabling mental health and wellbeing.

Key elements

- This initiative is designed to be undertaken with minimal disruptive impact on agency operations
- It will align with, and enhance, existing agency initiatives
- Involve a group of around 20 participants drawn from agencies across the sector - gender balanced and at least a pair from each agency. Ideally every agency will participate.
- Each agency will determine their most appropriate frontline leadership level to participate
- Individual and agency outcomes are expected
- Codesigned by the Learning Network
- Delivered by experts including Prof Russell Roberts Charles Sturt University and Kevin Smith Authentic Leadership Institute
- The development program will run over at least a six-month period focusing on innovative approaches to
    - Authentic frontline leadership
    - Leadership to enable mental health and wellbeing
    - Identification of barriers and enablers to mental health and wellbeing
    - Recommendations for the removal of barriers to mental health and wellbeing
    - Formative and summative evaluations of the program impact
- It will include
    - Self-assessment work to identify individual professional style
    - WorkSafe survey to enable evaluation of impact on the leader and their team
    - Action learning
    - One on one coaching
    - Peer to peer support network
    - Progress reviews
    - Recommendations for action to improve how frontline leaders are supported to lead for better mental health and wellbeing.

Expected outcomes

Frontline leaders participating in the pilot

Knowledge:

- Mental health and wellbeing literacy uplifted.
- Current research about barriers and enablers to good mental health and wellbeing in workplaces.
- Effective exemplars at both individual and organization levels - who does this well now?
- Toolkits and other resource availability.

Skills:

- Diagnostic ability to 'take the pulse' of the team and act appropriately on the result.
- Ability to create and sustain a psychologically safe work environment.
- Ability and willingness to initiate and engage in authentic, courageous conversations.

- Ability to model emotional intelligence.
- Ability to identify and overcome barriers to mental health and wellbeing in workplaces.

Attitudes:

- Empathy, care, compassion.
- Inclusivity, diversity.
- Vulnerability, transparency.

For agencies involved in the pilot

- Pairs of frontline leaders who are highly committed to the goal of enabling mental health and wellbeing in their workplaces and with the confidence and competence to achieve that goal.
- Feedback about the mental health and wellbeing environment in their agency and specific recommendations to improve it presented by the pilot participants.
- A network of frontline leaders who collaborate and support each other in addressing mental health and wellbeing issues.
- Champions for a new way of leading to promote psychologically safe work environments

For the sector

- An innovative new sector consistent leadership development model designed and evaluated collaboratively
- A core group a frontline leader from across the sector confident and competent to champion mental health and wellbeing leadership in their agencies.
- Recommendations for change to agency systems, processes, and culture to remove barriers to mental health and wellbeing.