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Barriers to Frontline Manager support of worker wellbeing from three angles

In this knowledge digest I provide an extended summary of: *Kellner, A.K., Townsend, K., Loudoun, R. and Wilkinson, A., 2019. Barriers to frontline manager support for high-trauma workers. Personnel Review, vol. 48, no. 6, pp. 1394-1409.*

<https://esf.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Barriers-to-frontline-manager-support-for-high-trauma-workers-002.pdf>

Key points

Investigated three Australian ambulance service organisations (mix of rural and urban)

Aim: to identify and understand barriers that prevent FLMs from providing the type, quality and quantity of support that's employees require for optimal wellbeing.

Qualitative: 72 interviews and 1,216 telephone surveys

Secondary data: used organisational, HRM and employee support strategy and planning documents, policies, procedures, and independent assessor reports.

Key findings: Nine barriers were identified that obstruct the provision of optimum employee support.

Wellbeing Support: a working model

Support can be conceptualised as four key types (house 1981):

- emotional (kindness, trust, respect, love and empathy)
- informational (technical information or advice)
- appraisal (evaluative feedback and learning)
- instrumental (provision of time, services, resources such as financial aid).

Examples of how a Frontline Manager (FLM) might address employee support needs across these four types of social support:



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Type	FLM support example
Emotional	FLM consoles, empathises with and expresses care towards employee who is distressed and anxious following a traumatic event
Informational	FLM provides advice on the how to access formal systems of support such as phone counselling or psychologist sessions
Appraisal	FLM appraises employees' decision making and clinical care in a difficult and traumatic case and reassures employee that correct action was taken
Instrumental	FLM arranges paid leave to aid recovery, and makes adaptations to the roster to ensure a gradual re-entry to work on lighter duties

Findings

Front Line Managers

Barriers that prevent FLMs providing support to employees are:

- **Training availability:** Need training to equip FLMs with the *skills and knowledge* to provide more effective support (all types, emotional, informational, appraisal and instrumental) to employees.
- **EQ:** Need attitude, mindset, personality empathise and *connect emotionally* with employees. "For some FLMs, it appeared emotional unsuitability or undeveloped emotional awareness/intelligence rather than lack of training was the fundamental barrier to providing emotional support."
- **Poor mental health** – "Interviewees drew attention to the fact that FLMs typically have a *long history of trauma exposure* and are at risk of suffering themselves from PTSD or associated mental illnesses. The following quote provides a colourful example of how it can be difficult for FLMs to identify symptoms in staff when everyone is wearing the same "shit coloured glasses"

Workplace Context

- **Physical proximity:** *Lack of staff contact* "You talk to different officers in charge and the ones that look after a little station will say it's really hard because it's isolated and they don't see their staff much. Then the busier ones will say the same thing – that they're just so busy they don't get to see their staff"



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- Time restrictions: *conflict between increased workload/ admin and need to support employees mental health. "You've only got the two [FLMs] who now [the organisation] have decided to put on managed hours, which basically means they're there from eight until four, Monday to Friday. Which I think is a real detriment to the crews [...] Their view is that [FLMs] are there to do the administration side of things"*
 - Workload restraints: *"[FLMs] don't see the staff, they might see them at the start of a shift but they don't get access to the staff because of workload to do the welfare check and do it properly"*

Note: Time restrictions ('busyness') is consistent with research that consistently points to increasing devolution of HRM responsibility to FLMs (who are expended to do more bureaucratic work) and pressure placed on their performance (Cunningham and Hyman, 1995; Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010).

Barriers from the views of workers.

Active participation and willingness is needed by both parties for team wellbeing. The following - both real and perceived - factors were found to prevent employees engaging and connecting with their frontline manager in a way that allows support to be received.

Barriers that prevent employees seeking support from their FLM are:

- Status differences: The FLMs position in the organisational hierarchy blocks confidence to raise personal issues. *Power and rank*. This sensitivity to hierarchy is found to be shifting among the younger generation.
- Employee's perception of relationship integrity: Many *lack trust* - trust that you will get understanding, compassion, support or confidentiality. *"..not every manager, but definitely some managers, will turn on you if they know you are having trouble"*.
- A sense of whether a manager is approachable: Attitude, personality or *mindset towards a FLM*. *"Our [FLM] is quite approachable... Whereas others don't feel that they're approachable and they would feel quite - they would need to [communicate] through a very formal process.*