
Thrive

Trust and mental health

by STEPHEN KEARNEY

High rates of stress and mental illness in New Zealand workplaces mean there is increasing recognition of the need to protect wellbeing and foster mental health at work.

Otherwise, we lose talented staff through stigma, stress and distress, and see team resilience and innovation suffer. Having more skilful conversations, between colleagues, and between employees and leaders, is crucial to building the trust and openness necessary to better manage hard times.

Many employees struggle with how to have conversations with their people leaders about their general wellbeing, and in particular experiences of stress and distress at work. Whether or not to disclose mental illness to their leader is also a fraught and difficult decision for many people. Doing so can offer a number of advantages, as leaders may be able to provide practical and emotional support, enable helpful changes in the workplace and be of assistance at times when things are particularly hard. There are also number of reasons why, as a leader, it can be useful for team members to disclose their difficulties, including providing a more authentic lens for understanding team members and being able to play a role in aiding their recovery.

However, fear of judgement and concerns about how the information might be used can often get in the way of disclosure, to the detriment of both the individual and the team.

There are a number of models describing the factors that might promote disclosure, most prominently “Psychological Safety”. However, at the heart of the employee’s decision is whether they trust their leader. Trust is the foundation of a safe workplace environment, it enables us to be appropriately vulnerable and take risks with whatever matters to us, whether that’s our self-image or our wellbeing.

Researchers Harrison McKnight and Norman Chervany suggest that trust is not situational so much as person-specific. By creating a sense of security (psychological safety) with an employee, leaders start to create this trust. McKnight and Chervany also identify four key factors that people will seek to be confident in before they will trust their leader, or colleagues.

1. Competence: Can my leader be useful to me in dealing with my difficulties? Can they help?

Leaders can send useful messages in this area by acknowledging some of the challenges people might be facing, and describing options that might be considered for helping with these challenges. Leaders also need to demonstrate a good understanding of the relevant support systems available in their organisation, including HR processes and EAP. At a more fundamental level, if their leader is seen as being able to offer wise advice and insight, this will also demonstrate a sense of competence.

2. Benevolence: Does my leader seek to understand and consider my needs and wants?

Importantly, this doesn't mean leaders immediately acquiescing to those needs and wants. Rather, if a leader has to make a difficult decision in relation to the team member, the employee knows that their needs and wishes will be sought and respected. In the case of stress, distress or mental illness, this might be discussing and collaborating with the employee to temporarily adjust their duties to give them space to recover.

Perhaps the most important element of benevolence is the absence of judgement. Human beings are evolved to seek and protect the esteem of those in positions of power. If employees expect to lose this because of disclosure, they are unlikely to disclose. Leaders can promote a perception of benevolence by showing an ongoing interest in the "whole person", including their strengths, weaknesses, passions and vulnerabilities. They can also model being vulnerable by acknowledging the aspects of work and life that they struggle with. This normalises and validates difficulties, and leads team members to feel that their own struggles will be understood.

3. Predictability: Do I know how my leader will react to my disclosure?

Leaders can help address this question by proactively sending consistent messages about how they view distress and mental illness, and how they might react to it. Importantly, these messages need to be affirming and validating, not critical or shaming. Most importantly, actions speak louder than words, so behaviours that are perceived as incongruent with words will get noticed. It is about being consistent in both message and action.

4. Integrity: Do I know my leader's values and will they stick to them?

When it comes to mental illness, this might include questions like: Will my leader protect my privacy? Will my leader use this information in other forums (e.g. performance management)? Has my leader spoken well of mental health in other contexts?

Of all the factors, integrity is a deal-breaker, and a small slip-up in integrity can be the hardest to recover from for any leader. If you are looking to build trust and promote disclosure, and thus engagement in help-seeking, then one useful strategy is to craft stories that describe how such disclosures might be handled, that answer the questions above. Ideally, these might be based on real events (but still protecting the identity of individuals). If team members believe their leader can provide useful support and guidance, cares about them, is predictable in how they will react, and will do the right thing, then that will set the conditions for trust.

Managing mental health well and supporting team members who may be experiencing mental illness is a new competency area for many leaders. Paying attention to these four factors, seeking feedback to improve - and authentically making efforts to do so - are some steps leaders can take to strengthen these skills.