Leading through the outbreak of COVID-19

Introduction

As a manager or leader in a workplace, our staff look to us for guidance, support and reassurance, particularly during times of heightened stress or change. Managers can play a vital role in a team's recovery from a crisis.

The key focus of a leader is to assist staff in a supportive and proactive manner to minimise any risk factors in the workplace. The coronavirus pandemic has placed additional demands on leaders as we navigate through a period of uncertainty and unpredictability.

Whilst it is important to acknowledge the scale of the outbreak and the severity of the crisis, effective leaders remain calm and maintain a positive sense of perspective on the team without underestimating the impact the crisis could have on them.

Mental Health in the Workplace

Most employees with a mental health condition will effectively manage their condition with little to no impact on their ability to perform their role. However, at times the employee may require additional support or adjustments to assist them in staying well or recovering from a period of ill mental health.

COVID-19 will impact on the mental health and wellbeing of all staff to some degree, especially impacting those with mental health concerns such as anxiety.

It is vital for leaders to remember that everyone will have a unique experience and response to a crisis. No one will have a complete, accurate picture of the event and potential consequences of COVID-19 but will be informed by what they have heard and been told by their support network.

Providing current and up-to-date information from reputable and reliable sources can help reduce any potential hysteria and fear around the outbreak.

As your organisation enacts Business Continuity Plans and puts in place adjustments to adhere to new social distancing legislation and other health advice to prevent the spread of COVID-19, it is important to continue to keep your staff updated with your response. Communications could include the outcomes of any operational and leadership meetings with any planned risk management strategies. As your response continues to change in line with new advice from the Australian Government or health department, keep your teams updated.

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What you can do as a leader

The support of a manager during this time is very important for someone experiencing heightened anxiety or worry. Your role is not of a mental health expert, but as a leader who can guide them through support options available or making reasonable adjustments to assist the individual to perform in their role.

There are several behaviours and steps we can take as leaders to navigate through the coronavirus pandemic and future crises:

- Speak openly about mental health and encourage others to do the same. It is important to normalise everyone's responses during this period of heightened worry and uncertainty, but also recognise that everyone's reactions will vary. It is critical to set an expectation with your teams to show respect to their peers, listen to each other's concerns, and role model this behaviour.
- Promote a positive work environment and minimise any further psychosocial risk factors such as job stress, workload, deadlines, role clarity and adequate resources to continue to work through any workplace modifications as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak (such as work from home arrangements).
- Reach out to employees you may be concerned about in a one-on-one setting, to understand their needs and offer options of support.
- Be present and available for your staff, implementing alternative strategies to achieve this whilst working remotely.
- Acknowledge the professional challenges that employees may be experiencing during this crisis due to changes in their personal circumstances, such as quarantine, self-isolation, loved ones in the high-risk category or changes in circumstances such as school closures.

Managing Remote Teams

Whilst most people working from home can attest to the pros of this structure, there can also be challenges. Often these challenges are compounded by technical challenges, including a lack of knowledge or comfort in the use of technology.

Here are some tips to assist you in managing remote working teams:
- Provide training in the tools and systems you require your staff to use whilst working remotely, particularly video conferencing platforms.
- Use video calls as a tool to engage with your remote staff. One of the benefits of video calls, over audio only conference calls is it reduces the likelihood staff will engage in multitasking, reducing distractions and improving meeting productivity.
- Commence a daily huddle or pre-start buzz to increase your visibility of who is working on what. This simple short meeting can help your team connect with each other. Some example questions for these meetings could include – 'What did you accomplish yesterday?', 'What will you do today?' and 'What obstacles, if any, are impeding your progress on your work goals at home?'.

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- Allow "Do Not Disturb" modes to be used throughout the day to allow staff to maintain focus and get work done, as they may in a quiet space in the office or by forwarding their calls to voicemail. It is important to set clear guidelines and expectations about the use of these tools.
- Continue regular one-on-one check-ins to monitor progress towards work tasks and deadlines, as well as checking in on your team's mental health and wellbeing.
- Create opportunities for social gatherings and connections that may typically occur in a workplace (such as a lunchroom). This could be a regular virtual morning tea where staff could join if/when they can for a quick social chat whilst enjoying a coffee/tea. Or a Friday afternoon social gathering at the end of the week.

Despite workers being confined to their home environments, technology provides many opportunities for engagement and interaction.

Conversations with your employees

Engaging in a conversation with an employee you are concerned about can be confronting and challenging. As leaders we may feel an overwhelming sense of responsibility or worry that we might say the wrong thing. Here are some simple tips to help you if you are engaging in a conversation with an employee presenting with heightened worry, anxiety or concern about the outbreak of COVID-19.

Some Conversation starters:
- Let the employee know you have noticed a change in their behaviour – "I've noticed you have been quieter in the office than you usually are, is everything ok?"
- Use open questions – "How are you going?"
- Ask them specifically how they are feeling in response to the outbreak, or the organisation's response – "How do you feel about the coronavirus outbreak?", "How do you feel the organisation has adhered to recommendations from the health authorities?"

Engaging in the conversation:
- Listen and ask questions, don't assume you know their story – "You said you are worried, what are you worried about?"
- Thank them for discussing their concerns with you – "Thank you for sharing your thoughts and feelings with me."
- Show that you are listening by maintain eye contact and ensure your body language is open and relaxed
- Repeat your understanding back – "Your biggest concern is your elderly mother contracting the virus, is that correct?"

Responding with support:
- Confirm your role and discuss escalation options if required – "Who do you think we can raise your concerns with?"

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- Ask them what you can do to assist them – "What do you need from me?", "How can I assist you during this time?"
- Offer them support services for their emotional wellbeing such as the EAP.
- Arrange to meet again to check in on them

Support is Available

It is common for leaders to focus on the operational needs, organisational challenges and the emotional turmoil of direct reports without considering their own needs as equally as important. All leaders are humans first and foremost.

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