How to develop a workplace mental health strategy

Regardless of the industry, employee wellbeing is essential to creating a healthy workplace environment. Staff who feel at their best can perform in their role, are more engaged and will likely stay with the company longer.

One in five Australian employees have experienced a mental health condition, such as anxiety or depression, in the workplace. These conditions impact more than the individual – they can also impact their peers, colleagues, and affect their work performance.

According to the Work Health and Safety Act 2011 employers are responsible for creating a physically and mentally healthy workplace for employees. One key component to achieve this is a workplace mental health strategy.

A workplace mental health strategy is a plan to build a healthy workplace environment through the protection, promotion, and support of better mental health. These include policies, procedures, and initiatives in your organisation that promote wellbeing and provide support for employees facing mental health conditions.

What is a mentally healthy workplace?

A mentally healthy workplace is supportive of, and committed to, positive mental health. All team members, including leaders, prioritise staff wellbeing and are actively involved in building a respectful and inclusive work culture. The organisation also has realistic work demands for all staff and employees feel comfortable talking about mental health issues and know where they can go for support.

Prioritising employee wellbeing is more than just an obligation. Organisations that prioritise mental health and the workplace reap a host of benefits, including:

- Positive return on investment. Mental health in the workplace statistics reveal every dollar spent on mental health initiatives will have an average ROI of $2.30.
- Improved recruitment and retention efforts. By building a positive workplace with happy and healthy staff, your organisation can attract and retain the best talent.
Higher levels of engagement and work performance. Staff are more likely to be engaged if they have a positive work environment. Greater employee engagement is shown to improve performance and work quality, and increase productivity at work.

How do you promote a healthy workplace environment?

A healthy workplace environment starts with an integrated approach to wellbeing and mental health. An integrated approach incorporates considered actions across departments and functions, in order to build a positive work environment. These are informed by Work Health and Safety (WHS) principles, public health and psychology research, and best practices.

Ongoing participation and communication is key to delivering healthy workplace environment initiatives. According to research, meaningful participation is essential to the success of actions designed to address mental and physical health. Any initiatives should be co-designed with staff so they are active participants in the plan and outcome. This way, they bring different points of view, and are more engaged in the implementation stage of the initiative. Regular communication – whether face-to-face or electronically – helps build momentum for change, reduced stigma around mental health conditions, and encourage buy-in.

Lastly, a positive work culture starts from the top. A healthy workplace environment is only possible with the commitment and support of an organisation’s leaders. As the driving force of the company, management teams have a strong influence on the overall company atmosphere and employee experience.

Leaders should spearhead a company’s mental health efforts in the workplace through:

- openly addressing challenges around mental health and the workplace
- encompassing mental health into the company’s objectives
- ensuring employees have manageable workloads
- developing strong leadership, empathy and people skills
- implement policies and procedures to promote a mentally healthy workplace
- providing flexible work conditions for employees, including those with a mental health condition
- adopting a zero-tolerance approach to discrimination and bullying.
Leaders and managers also play vital roles in developing and championing the workplace mental health strategy.

**Developing your workplace mental health strategy**

A workplace mental health strategy helps drive organisational change and promote a healthy workplace environment. Whether you’re just getting started or want to develop your strategy, these steps can help you build a solid foundation.

Remember each business or organisation is different, so it’s important to tailor this to your company’s needs and structure.

**Gain support from leadership teams**

To have the best chance of success, a workplace mental health strategy should be spearheaded by those in leadership positions. Each stakeholder has different values and priorities. Some are in full support of workplace mental health initiatives, while others may need convincing. Regardless, it’s essential to onboard them and have their commitment before rolling out any initiative.

One of the best starting points is to build a business case. This examines why it’s important for your organisation to create, or improve on, its mental health strategy.

To build a strong business case, it’s important to integrate arguments that appeal to the different parties involved in your workplace mental health strategy. These can highlight the financial benefits, the ethical importance of workplace mental health, or the impact on your organisation’s public image. Support your arguments with mental health in the workplace statistics, and use best practices to demonstrate how successful initiatives benefit organisations.

**Identify your organisation’s needs through an audit**

Before implementing new initiatives, conduct a situational analysis to evaluate existing mental health practices and identify any gaps. Look at your existing policies and procedures, and consider the following:

- What policies and practices are in place to support employees’ wellbeing and mental health?
- Is your organisation meeting legal obligations, including the Work Health and Safety Act 2009 and the Equal Employment Opportunity Act 1987?
- Where can employees go for support? Do you have an Employee Assistance Program?
- Is your organisation supportive of flexible work schemes?
- Do you have an Incident Response Plan to help managers and colleagues identify signs of mental illness in the workplace?
- How regularly do you conduct mental health workplace training?

It’s also useful to understand how your organisation is performing when compared to industry benchmarks. This can include absenteeism, workers compensation claims, turnover rates, or workplace productivity reports. An employee survey can also reveal valuable insights around any existing issues or attitudes towards workplace mental health.

Going forward, these pieces of data can form the baseline to measure your efforts and help identify areas for improvement.

**Build an action plan with clear objectives and outcomes**

Using the results of your audit, you should have valuable results that can inform your action plan.

From the list of issues, first identify those that will have the most impact on employee mental health and wellbeing. Next, rank the issues based on your organisation’s level of motivation to affect change. Those that are the most impactful and have the highest level of buy-in from stakeholders should be prioritised in your action plan.

Using this, establish three to five clear objectives for your organisation to focus on. These should be broken down into short, medium and long-term actions and KPIs. Regardless of the objective, your goals and outcomes should follow S.M.A.R.T. goal principles (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timely).

After setting your goals, list out the resources and expertise that you will need to achieve them. This may include internal experts or external organisations, such as HeadsUp, Head To Health or Beyond Blue.

**Monitor, review and improve**

Feedback and communication are essential to the success of your workplace mental health strategy. Set regular check-in points to monitor the outcomes of your initiatives against your objectives and KPIs. These should be frequent at the start of an initiative to build momentum and raise awareness: for example, once
every week or every fortnight. Once teams are on board, you can reduce the frequency to monthly or quarterly.

During these sessions, focus on gathering feedback from different departments. Evaluate the actions which are effective, and acknowledge and celebrate these successes with your team. In addition, look at any challenges your organisation may be facing, and work together to find actions that may help resolve these.

Building a mentally healthy workplace requires ongoing commitment. A strong workplace mental health strategy is an essential step in the process. With the right action plan and support from leadership, you can cultivate a positive work culture in your organisation.

To help you develop a mental health policy in your workplace, AGWA have provided a Mental Health Policy framework for member use. This framework is designed to help you and your employees manage and respond to mental health issues in the workplace.

Visit the following sites for information on caring for mental health:

- Head to Health - [COVID-19 Support](#)
- Beyond Blue - [Looking after your mental health during the coronavirus outbreak](#)
- Australian Psychological Society - [Tips for coping with coronavirus anxiety](#)
- Headspace - [How to cope with stress related to coronavirus (COVID-19)](#)