By Anthony Klarica – Elite Performance, Six-Star Staff Wellbeing & Engagement Survey

Staff Wellbeing and Engagement

Workplace Wellbeing Emergence and Definition

Employee wellbeing and mental health is an area of emerging and increasing interest in organisations within Australia and globally. However, there are a wide range of interpretations of general and employee wellbeing. The World Health Organisation defines wellbeing as "a state in which an individual realises their own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to contribute to their community" (1). This interpretation embraces a holistic approach to wellbeing, where-as earlier explanations considered wellbeing as being more about the absence of a physical or mental concern. Such a focus embraces a flourishing approach to wellbeing that is in line with positive psychology and maximising people, personally and professionally.

The Australian Human Resources Institute defines wellbeing as "a measure of a person's happiness, psychological, emotional and mental state" (2). With regards to mental health at work, it has been considered that "a mentally healthy workplace is one that protects and promotes mental health and empowers people to seek help for depression or anxiety, for the benefit of the individual, organisation and community" (3).

Safework Australia has suggested that "providing a mentally healthy workplace not only protects workers from psychological harm, it positively enhances their mental health and can improve business productivity" (4).

Wellbeing Impact

It has been identified that staff with higher subjective wellbeing have higher job performance (5). This arises from a number of possible factors including:

- Increased cognitive performance and cognitive processes enabling greater creativity and problem-solving

- A more positive work attitude enabling increased collaboration and cooperation

- Improved physical health, reducing illness, enhancing return from illness and securing greater levels of energy while at work (5).

Indeed job satisfaction has been shown to be linked to job performance (6). In this study, it was identified that employee job satisfaction is positively associated with organisation financial performance, labour productivity and the quality of output and service. More specifically it was found that workplaces with an increase in staff being "very satisfied" or a reduction in the proportion of staff being "very dissatisfied" resulted in an improvement in workplace performance over several years (6).

In more general terms, it has been recognised that employee wellbeing or mentally healthy workplaces can positively impact mental health, engagement and productivity, reduce absenteeism and presenteeism as well as improve staff retention (7).

Mental Health

Data shows that at any one point in time, one in six Australian workers experience a mental illness. Many others will be experiencing the initial signs of mental illness including insomnia, worry and fatigue (8). This correlates with an estimation that across a 12 month period in the general Australian population 20% of people will experience a mental health condition. More specifically, approximately 14% of people will experience an anxiety disorder and about 7% will experience depression in a given year, totalling about 3 million people (9).

With respect to workers, it has been reported that 91% of Australian employees surveyed felt that mental health in the workplace was important. This compared to a rating of 88% believing that physical safety was important, reflecting an ever-increasing recognition of the importance of wellbeing and mental health at work (3). As many as 1 in 5 staff surveyed had taken time off work in the past 12 months due to stress, anxiety, depression or feeling mentally unhealthy (3).

Safework Australia has reported that on average for each year from 2012 to 2017 over 7,000 Australians were compensated for work-related mental health conditions. The total cost per annum for these claims was $543 million. The main cause of claims was work pressure (21%) and work related harassment or bullying (20%) (10).

The work pressure related to work backlogs and deadlines, organisational restructures, interpersonal conflict, disciplinary actions, performance counselling or promotion disappointment (10).

The occupations identified to be at most risk for work related stress claims were (10):

- Defence force members, fire fighters and police

- School teachers

- Health and welfare support workers

The above occupations however are only three of many impacted. Within Australia mental health issues in the workplace have been estimated to cost the economy approximately 12 billion dollars annually (11). As a counter-balance, when organisations invest in mental health and wellbeing programs, return on investment has been estimated at between $2.30 for every dollar spent on wellbeing programs (12) up to $4.70 return on investment from improving psychological conditions at work and return to work programs (11).

Engagement At Work

While there are wide-ranging definitions of employee engagement the Australian Human Resources Institute suggests that common themes of an engaged workplace include: (13)

- Feelings of commitment, passion and energy
- High levels of energy and determination towards challenging tasks
- Taking initiative

Research by Gallup has indicated that in Australia and New Zealand, only 24% of employees are highly or fully engaged, while 60% are not engaged, and 16% are actively disengaged. This percentage of engaged to actively disengaged workers is one of the highest in the world (14).

This is in stark contrast to highly engaged employees, who perform up to 20% better at work and are up to 87% less likely to leave their organisation (15) (16).

Proactive Wellbeing and Education In Workplaces

One of the key recommendations of a report into workplace mental health was to "invest in promotion, prevention and early intervention" of mental health (11). They identify that a wide range of interventions have been trialled globally and could be considered including: (11)

- Managing job control by designing roles that empower employees over how, when and where they complete their work
- Conduct Cognitive-Behaviour-Therapy based resilience training to provide staff with effective techniques to deal with setbacks and manage wellbeing
- Conduct mental health screening that incorporates post-screening procedures
- Having mental health training to educate leaders in developing and dealing with wellbeing and mental health

Along similar lines a number of "evidence based" strategies have been identified to develop a mentally healthy workplace. (17) These are:

- Designing and managing work to minimise harm
- Promoting protective factors at an organisational level to maximise resilience
- Enhancing personal resilience
- Promoting and facilitating early help-seeking
- Supporting workers recovery from mental illness

Practical recommendations were described as:

- Establish leadership commitment and support related to staff wellbeing
- Conduct a situational analysis
- Identify and implement appropriate intervention strategies
- Review outcomes
- Adjust intervention strategies (17)

Taking into account the importance of a culture that facilitates help-seeking, surveyed workers were more likely to approach Human Resources for assistance if they were in a "mentally healthy workplace" (57%), as compared to being in a "mentally unhealthy" workplace, where only 41% of staff reported that they would approach HR for assistance (3).

With respect to leadership, only 56% of surveyed workers believed that workplace mental health was valued by their CEO and 52% felt it was valued by their industry (3). This information certainly places a spotlight on leadership with regard to how they directly manage wellbeing and mental health issues, as well as the culture that they set regarding such issues.

Programs Using the Six-star Wellbeing Survey

In my experience of working with individuals and organisations regarding performance and wellbeing, one key action is to identify what is working, as well as relative key areas of concern. This is readily done by collecting qualitative information from specific staff across the organisation including leaders, as well as quantitatively collecting data. To ensure honesty, as well as ease of maintaining confidentiality, such data would be individually anonymous.

Additionally, such data collection in my opinion, should be sub-clinical and multi-dimensional rather than a uni-dimensional mental health survey. Multi-dimensional tools are more applicable to an entire staff population. In addition, multi-dimensional tools intrinsically lead to group education due to the inclusion of positive psychology topics. Such programs not only assist to develop individual social and emotional skills but also impact the overall climate of an organisation.

For this purpose, over a number of years I developed the Six-Star Wellbeing Survey. The survey provides an insight to mood, resilience, engagement, relaxation, communication and positivity (18). Information is obtained on the overall workforce, as well as sub-groups. The comprehensive report provides a wide variety of information and insight to organisation wellbeing. Such information assists to direct and drive models of proactive wellbeing coaching and development across the organisation. The information can also be viewed as feedback to leaders regarding the wellbeing of the organisation. All individual staff responses are anonymous.

Summary

Workplace wellbeing and mental health are vital areas for leaders, organisations and staff to proactively manage. Effective programs not only develop positive individual personal and work skills, but can also enhance the culture of an organisation. Additionally, proactive wellbeing programs can provide significant personal, organisational and financial rewards through appropriate focus in this area. The Six-Star Wellbeing Survey available through the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is a tool that can assist organisations in this process.

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Anthony has worked in education, sport and corporate environments in wellbeing and performance for over 20 years

Want to know more?

Six-Star Wellbeing surveys are available through the Australian Council for Education and Research (ACER) **E:** sales@acer.org **T:** +61 3 9277 5447

sixstar wellbeing

MOOD   RESILIENCE   ENGAGEMENT   COMMUNICATION   RELAXATION   POSITIVITY

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