

Psychologically Healthy Workplaces

Leaders in the field of engagement and wellbeing, PeopleCentric work closely with Dr Peter Hart. During a recent visit to New Zealand he shared some insights with us about what it takes to create a psychologically healthy workplace.

Phrases like ‘workplace health’ or ‘workplace wellbeing’ were once viewed with skepticism among those in the business world. But as more evidence emerges around the far-reaching effects of employee wellbeing on organisations, more people are standing up to take notice.

A psychologically healthy workplace is one that is conducive to enhancing the wellbeing of individuals, ultimately improving performance and the bottom line.

How do we make this happen?

The first step is selecting the right employees. “The number one cause of stress in an organisation is people’s personalities,” Dr Hart explains.

The personality of an employee will have a huge impact on how that person responds to stress on a day-to-day basis. Two employees can be exposed to the same workplace incident, but have completely different reactions.

Tools like psychometric testing allow organisations to identify which prospective or current employees are likely to have negative emotional reactions to situations in the workplace. When used as a part of the recruitment process, these can effectively change the ‘gene-pool’.

This helps deal with negative employees but it will not lift the performance of everybody in the organisation. “The causes of positive emotion are different to the causes of negative emotion. This means that different strategies are needed to enhance wellbeing,” Dr Hart points out.

To enhance the wellbeing within your organisation, it is necessary to understand the underlying differences between positive and negative emotion. This can be effectively illustrated by two triangles – a red (learned helplessness) triangle and a blue (active learning) triangle.

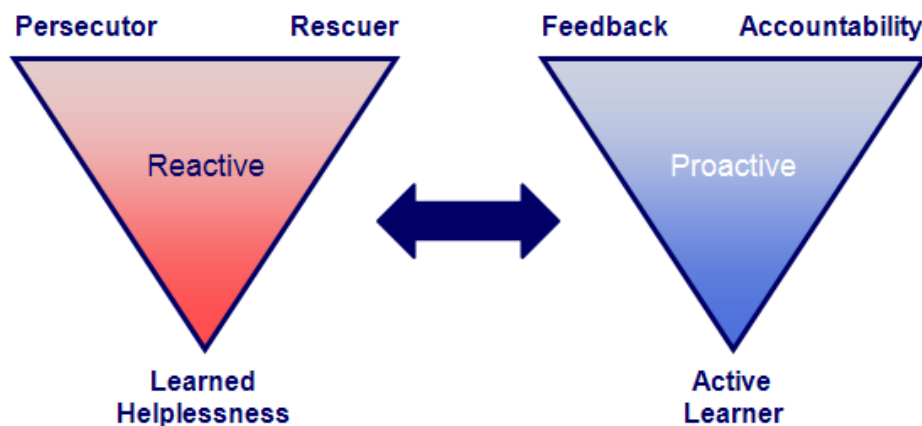


Image: The triangles illustrate Learned Helplessness and Active Learning in individuals

Employees in the red triangle are in a negative emotional state. They are not taking responsibility for the challenges they face, instead they blame others or external factors. This can become a difficult cycle to break. "When we're in the heat of the moment we tend to replay what is going on, in an attempt to understand or clarify what is happening. This reinforces the negative emotion," Dr Hart explains.

Leaders perpetuating this state tend to persecute or rescue employees. The rescuing leader thinks they are helping out by being the 'nice guy'. In reality this can often be disempowering, as the employee never learns to solve problems themselves. Employees end up relying on the leader to resolve even trivial matters such as which toilet paper to buy. If you asked a leader operating in the blue triangle which paper to get, it is likely they would tell you to decide for yourself; however a rescuer would make the decision for you. This leads to learned helplessness behavior from the employee.

A persecuting leader prevents employees from making decisions due to fear of being blamed if it does not work. In this instance you see a lot of finger pointing and a blame culture. Again, leading to learned helplessness.

Those in the blue triangle are thinking in terms of the future. They are seeking feedback and looking for solutions to move forward. Leaders operating in this state provide appropriate and timely feedback to their employees, and ensure accountability.

"When the red triangle is dominating you've got a lot of stress in organisations. When the blue triangle is dominating you've got a lot of morale... you've got engagement."

So how can we move out of the learned helplessness of the blue triangle and into the forward thinking red triangle?

Luckily, as these two states are polar opposites, a person cannot be in both at the same time. By encouraging an employee to get into an active learning mindset, you are helping them move away from the negative emotional thought process. This can be done by first acknowledging how the employee is feeling, before entering into a conversation around 'how can we move forward from here?'

"You get people to stop thinking like a chimpanzee - what they start doing is using the frontal areas of the brain, which is much more logic, reasoning. You're trying to get them thinking in a much more visionary space... It's about the future," Dr Hart explains.

By focusing on the future, you have essentially flipped a switch in their head – from a place of negative emotion to one of logic, reasoning and planning ahead. This is because you cannot work in both the emotional and logical areas of the brain at the same time.

How do we lift overall team engagement?

The triangles are useful in understanding how to support individuals, but resolving distress at a team level is equally important for effective performance. The following behaviours help to create team engagement:

Empathy: Empathy is the basis for effective leadership. “Everything has to start with empathy, not end with it,” Dr Hart says. Leaders should be approachable and genuinely understanding of staff problems. This means using active listening skills to ensure good communication with employees.

Clarity: Make sure staff know what is expected of them, and how this fits with the bigger picture of what they are trying to achieve in the next month, next 3 months, next 6 months, next 12 months and regularly review these objectives.

Dr Hart warns against relying on job descriptions to build role clarity. “They’re a great accountability mechanism, so you can beat somebody up when they don’t deliver what you want them to deliver. But they actually don’t build clarity.” Clarity comes out of conversation based around what objectives employees are trying to deliver.

Avoid simply telling employees things and assuming that they understand what you mean. Instead make the communication a two-way street by getting employees to explain their understanding of the information being given. “That feed back-up is one of those really important things that will tell you whether or not people are buying in or not,” Dr Hart says.

Engagement: Provide opportunities for employees to support each other and work together to get things done. Bring team members together regularly and involve them in the decision making process – What are this month’s objectives? Who will achieve what? Discuss new projects with staff and engage them in a discussion around how these projects benefit them. “When people feel ownership over their work they will go the extra mile, no questions asked. That’s the discretionary effort.”

Learning: Put formal and informal processes in place to enable staff to receive feedback on their performance. Team based feedback is particularly effective – have each team member take a turn at being the ‘critical friend’ in each staff meeting to provide feedback on three positive aspects and three suggested improvements from the meeting. Put short review sessions in place fortnightly to give staff an opportunity to discuss progress and any lessons learned over the last two weeks.

A lot of words are used to describe the things that make workplaces psychologically healthy – engagement, morale, wellbeing, positive psychology. Whichever word you use, there is no doubt that these working environments encourage innovation and increase performance. It doesn’t have to take a long time to increase team engagement and organisational wellbeing, all it takes is an understanding of the behaviours and processes that drive it.

How does your organisation measure up?

- 1) Do your leaders balance task focused clarity with individual and team support?
- 2) Do your teams consistently achieve levels of positivity or morale that outweighs distress?
- 3) Are indications of distress such as ‘withdrawal behaviour’ (for example sick leave, staff turnover) low?

The PeopleCentric team work closely with Dr Peter Hart to help organisations tap into engagement and team morale. If you would like to discuss ways your organisation could increase these, or simply find out more on this topic – contact PeopleCentric today.