# safety

**promoting and protecting worker health and safety**

It is a core responsibility of organisations to provide a workplace and work practices that promote positive health, safety and wellbeing of staff. In addition to appropriate policies, procedures, audits and training to reduce workplace accidents and injuries, more organisations are implementing multi-faceted programs that promote healthy lifestyle and behaviour choices, and include initiatives such as health and wellness screenings, mental health services, and health classes. Growing evidence suggests ongoing investments into these programs not only help improve safety metrics but also benefit the organisation by lowering absenteeism and boosting productivity.

## suggested actions

- **senior management commitment** Senior management plays a crucial role in influencing the perception and climate of health and safety within an organisation. To improve an organisation's safety climate and proactively manage the risk of injuries and accidents, management need to set transparent safety goals, role model safe work behaviour; regularly attend staff safety consultations and safety walk-around inspections; communicate current initiatives with staff; and ensure processes and policies support employees in achieving good work heathy and safety.

- **education and training** Well-designed training can be an effective intervention for promoting a sound work health and safety climate and improving the safety of work practices. Training should be aimed at increasing awareness, fostering a safety mindset, and ensuring both managers and staff feel adequately resourced and skilled to prevent, identify, report and manage physical and psychological hazards. Effective work health and safety training targets the organisation's most critical safety issues, is regularly run, tailored to the organisation's context, interactive, not solely focused on regulations, and helps develop a common understanding and language around safety.

- **adequate resources** The impact of a work health and safety program can be maximised through allocating adequate resources. Beyond appointing a dedicated, qualified health and safety officer or committee, organisations should look to identify other individuals, health departments and partners (e.g., EAP provider, community health groups) to assist with planning, implementation, publications and online resources. Resources can also be directed at removing barriers to participation for staff, such as reimbursement for program costs, scheduling programs on company time, and offering child care options.

- **foster a collective approach** The frequency of accidents and injuries reduce significantly when an organisation's safety mindset shifts from an individual to an interdependent focus. By making safety a responsibility of the collective, employees are more likely to look out for one another, report incidents and hazards, learn from one another, and strive for a zero safety incident record. To promote a collective approach, establish shared goals, team rewards, and performance management processes that hold teams, not only individuals, accountable.

- **evaluate and revise** Beyond serving the purpose of regulatory compliance, ongoing monitoring and evaluation is critical to improving the work health and safety performance of an organisation. Evaluations, which can be done via staff survey, audits and reviewing operational metrics, should provide meaningful quantitative and qualitative feedback on systemic issues that can be used to enhance existing initiatives and inform future interventions.

## case study

Bankstown City Aged Care (BCAC) is a local aged care provider with approximately 300 staff servicing "people who are aged, disabled, suffer with dementia, or, who are otherwise disadvantaged". Managing and improving physical and psychological safety is a key priority for BCAC as majority of their frontline staff are required to perform manual handling on a regular basis such as lifting equipment and doing household tasks, and can be exposed to psychological stress when interacting and caring for clients with physical or mental disabilities.

About eight years ago, despite having relevant policies in place, BCAC staff reported confusion about work, health and safety (WH&S) regulations, issues and reporting requirements. These problems prompted the design and implementation of a more comprehensive WH&S framework which encompasses multiple initiatives. BCAC established a WH&S committee that includes a dedicated officer, and meets monthly to investigate safety incidents and implement appropriate solutions such as training, purchasing new equipment, and updating processes. In addition, BCAC introduced:

- processes and checklists that enable staff to identify and report safety hazards
- quarterly external audits of the environment and WH&S practices to identify safety risks
- a mixture of mandatory and voluntary training that covers topics such as identification and reporting of hazards, causes of workplace accidents, and use of Personal Protective Equipment
- a log of all safety related incidents and accidents at BCAC
- ergonomic assessments for office staff and regular breaks to do stretching exercises

The committee also has plans for improving staff psychological wellbeing through access to an employee assistance program and grievance officer. They provide frontline staff with training in behavioural management which equips them with the relevant skills to deal with clients' challenging behaviours. Michelle Doyle, Business Support Manager of BCAC, considers certain elements of their safety program to be transferable, such as establishing a WH&S committee, conducting regular surveys and audits and formal training.

The WH&S program hasn't always been smoothly run. Michelle recalled there was resistance from some managers in the early days, which was overcome by showing them how the program impacted outcomes such as workers' compensation premiums. Others were concerned about the additional workload this might bring but mentoring and guidance helped bring them on board. Managers were also trained to put in place control measures and to coach and mentor staff through the changes. Michelle believed that strong teamwork between HR and WH&S units, managers being respectful towards the committee and responsive to feedback, and proper documentation all helped make the program successful and embed a safety culture at BCAC.

As a result of the continuous efforts of the WH&S committee, BCAC staff now have a greater awareness of safety issues and their role in reporting and preventing safety incidents. Staff also demonstrate a greater willingness to report safety incidents at work. These have translated into measurable changes such as more than 60% reduction in workers' compensation premium over the last 8 years. In BCAC's most recent staff survey, 98% of their staff reported that keeping high levels of health and safety is a priority of BCAC, which puts them at 12 percentage point above the industry average.

## useful resources

- http://www0.health.nsw.gov.au/policies/pd/2013/pdf/PD2013_050.pdf

- http://www.workplacehealth.org.au/UnderstandWorkplaceHealth/best-practice-guidlines

- Vredenburgh, A. G. (2002). Organizational safety: Which management practices are most effective in reducing employee injury rates? Journal of Safety Research, *33, 259-276*.

- Kelly, R. K. & Carter, M. (2016). Health and Safety: Perspectives, from the Field. In M. J. Grawitch and D. W. Ballard (Eds.), The Psychologically Healthy Workplace (pp. 231 – 256), American Psychological Association, Washington.