wellness

supporting psychological health and employee wellbeing

Healthy workplaces provide employees with the 'right' amount of challenge and support to successfully perform and enjoy their work. Employee wellbeing has significant implications for workforce sustainability, WHS incidents and costs, as well as performance.

suggested actions

- **involvement and influence** One of the primary drivers of wellbeing is how much control an individual feels they have over their work. People are able to cope better with higher demands if they are given flexibility in where and when they work, autonomy in how they complete tasks, and input into decisions that affect their work. It is particularly important to consult with staff about change. Provide high quality information about how, when and why changes will occur to reduce employee uncertainty and provide a sense of agency and control.

- **workload management** Assess hazardous psychological demands including time stressors, breaks, resource deficiencies, incentive systems, repetitive tasks and shift work. Consistently working long hours significantly increases the risk of major mental health problems. A workplace culture encouraging a healthy work-life balance and recovery time away from work can be role-modelled and supported by leadership. Workload also affects perceptions of fairness, as employees balance up their efforts versus their rewards. Perceived inequity in this exchange can lead to burnout, depression, anxiety and stress. Pay attention to due process and recognise employees for their contributions.

- **training** Employees who believe they are adequately resourced in terms of knowledge and skills feel more supported by their employer and better equipped for challenging tasks. Give employees specific and relevant on-the-job training, and opportunities to identify, develop and leverage their strengths.

- **social support** Quality work relationships characterised by empathy and approachability improve employees' resilience and coping mechanisms. Equip supervisors with skills to conduct coaching conversations and to proactively check in with staff about both personal and work-related issues. Create opportunities for staff to interact and connect socially. Have processes in place to intervene if an employee looks distressed at work.

- **positive workplace** While it is important to reduce negative cognitive and emotional impacts of stress, it is also important to increase the balance of positive thoughts, behaviours and emotions for healthy functioning. Positivity increases the ability of employees to cope with stress and build resilience. At work, these positive emotions are contagious – being passed on from team members and supervisors to affect the whole group. Focus on learning from successes and what's working. Celebrate achievements, affirm your organisation's strengths and practice gratitude. Identify and acknowledge employees' character strengths, and find new ways for staff to apply their strengths.

case study

Knox Grammar School is an independent K-12 boys' school, with over 2,300 students and 360 staff. Like most in the education sector, Knox Grammar School has highly passionate staff, yet in 2006 it found itself not performing academically, and in 2009 dealing with negative media coverage. Staff morale was generally low, with a culture of separation between departments. Head of Positive Education at Knox, Dr Steve Zolezzi acknowledges that it was a hard moment. "People were saying we can't go on working like this at Knox … it was probably a most powerful trigger for change".

After a wide search, the executive identified positive psychology as an evidence-based body of research to develop a school-wide positive education program. This involved a strategic 3 year plan, informed by student exit surveys and staff interviews to not only change the structure and content of individual and group mentoring sessions, but educate and enable all staff to make changes in teaching methods and interactions. "Things were going to be done differently and we were going to talk differently at the school". A top down staggered approach was used to role-model, engage and empower senior leaders, followed by staff, and finally students. They invested heavily in an intensive 3-day course on positive psychology, mental health, wellbeing, and how to conduct coaching conversations. All executive and staff, including cleaning, administration, computer and sports staff participated in the training, "because we wanted everyone to be conversant with positive psychology and the language to be totally transforming of the old culture".

Although the changes added to staff workloads, Voice Survey results showed staff wellness actually improved during the process. Firstly, social support was bolstered through buddy systems and structured mentor group meetings to "share tips and continue to get support from the psychologists and share what is going on". Secondly, the management style of senior leaders became more consultative and empathic. Staff were invited to contribute ideas on age-appropriate programs, given choices about age groups to work with and formats for mentoring sessions, and encouraged to pursue special interests aligned with the program. Finally, extensive training and coaching were provided both in positive education and in core curriculum. Staff were also rewarded and acknowledged for their involvement.

The impact of the program has been transformational. Staff "like telling stories now" about how positive psychology has reinvigorated tired teaching methods, given them greater confidence, a sense of value and a focus on strengths. For Zolezzi "the most gratifying thing is if you walk into the staff room you will see that people are having nurturing conversations", and he's observed more acts of kindness and generosity. "If you've got happy teachers that translates into a happy school". Feedback from students and parents has been positive, and there is now optimism about the future for the school with staff feeling like "we're going to go somewhere, we're on a mission".

useful resources

- **Using Positive Psychology to Manage Workplace Stress** and **Promoting Wellbeing at Work**. College of Organisational Psychologists, APS. http://www.groups.psychology.org.au/resources

- http://workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com

- http://www.guardingmindsatwork.ca/info/gmaw_resources/action_tools

- http://unhealthywork.org/workplace-stressors

- http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm

- http://www.ruokday.com.au/resources-for-you/r-u-ok-at-work