

7 FATAL MISTAKES MANAGERS MAKE WITH EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH



#1

Blaming the canary

In days gone by, miners would take a small canary down into the coal mine with them. Coal mining was a much more dangerous profession than it is today, and one of the silent killers was toxic and highly flammable gases. These gasses were often odourless, so the miners wouldn't know they were ingesting them until they lost consciousness and often died, or a spark caused an explosion and cave in. Because the canary was a more sensitive animal, it would start showing symptoms of toxic gas poisoning before the miners. So the miners would keep an eye on the canary and if it started looking unwell, what do you think they did? Well, I can tell you what they didn't do. They didn't say:

"Don't worry about it. He's faking it! I'm sure he's faking it."

"He's not pulling his weight, is he?"

"I am so busy, I don't have time for this!"

No, they got the hell out of the mine.

The miners took care of their canary. They understood that the canary had a more sensitive nature and that sensitivity was an asset to the team. In our organisations, we should be adopting the same approach. We should ask ourselves:

"What 'toxic fumes' could be present in this team that no one else seems to have sensed yet, but that everybody is breathing?"

#2

Further isolating the person

It's all too common that when a staff member starts showing signs that they are not mentally well, their manager will decide they have to tread carefully, and so they'll seek advice on what to do next. They'll speak with their own manager, also HR, who may then discuss among themselves and perhaps involve Legal... By the time the staff member with the (potential) problem is approached, decisions have been made by multiple parties, none of whom are in possession of the facts - because no one has spoken to the staff member in question.

As that staff member, learning that several people have discussed your mental state behind your back and come to some decisions without involving you, how likely are you to trust your manager or any of those people again?

One of the first, if not *the* first thing that suffers when people become distressed and mentally unwell is real trust in the relationship they have with their manager and with other team members. They don't lose all trust per se, but they lose trust that their relationship with you and others is strong enough for them to communicate openly and honestly; and they lose trust that you really have their back.

#3

Treating mentally unwell employees like psychopaths

3 to 4 percent of Australians display the characteristics of a psychopath. Psychopaths are willing to consciously lie and manipulate to get their way without a second thought of how their actions impact others. People with psychopathic tendencies can cause untold damage to organisations, and managers do well protecting themselves from them.

When presented with an employee with a mental health problem, many managers are concerned that they may be being manipulated. The reality that employee mental health problems do tend to emerge more frequently in times of change or organisational stress can provide a context that makes a mental health concern look suspiciously like a tactic to further the employee's interests.

Few managers have the psychiatric training to correctly diagnose psychopathy and statistically, it is far more likely that the problem is genuine. A smart manager will not have let things progress this far: where there is effectively zero trust between the manager and the employee, such that manipulation is even a consideration.

A good mental health program needs to look at the culture of the organisation, and encourage managers to promote trust and respect in every interaction with employees. Real psychopaths cannot operate in these conditions and will opt out.

#4

Assuming mental health problems are isolated

Many workplaces adopt a reactive posture to mental health problems. They may be aware of a few problems - some individuals - who are struggling or who are 'a bit high maintenance' or who even have gone so far as to lodge psychological injury claims. The organisation deals with these 'isolated' cases by sending the person on stress leave, and perhaps for good measure, decides to run some 'awareness' sessions for employees.

Mental health problems in the workplace resemble the well worn iceberg analogy: the problems you know about are only the tip of a much larger iceberg that is a drain on your organisation's morale and productivity, and a ready supply of future workplace mental health challenges.

The statistics tell us that one in five adult Australians each year experience a mental disorder. The ones you know about are the proverbial 'canaries in the coal mine'. The silent majority is just that: silent.

When preparing an organisational response to employee mental health problems, consider deeper and more integrated strategies than the easy but ineffective in the long term 'stress leave and awareness sessions' approach.

#5

Disabling rather than enabling

There are many different approaches to understanding and addressing mental ill-health and some approaches are more disabling than others. A popular one in Western societies is to treat mental health problems as an illness. According to this approach, a mental illness is a biological or chemical event, which can come out of nowhere and strike anyone, at any time, with very little, if anything, that you can do about it.

While it may seem that way to the person experiencing it, we know that in the majority of cases, there are in fact some underlying causes for mental ill health, which result from the situations, challenges and events in a person's life, and their psychological approach to those events.

The problem with 'illness' messaging is that it causes fear, uncertainty, and increases the helplessness of all employees receiving that message, whether or not they have been experiencing any mental ill-health previously. That is disempowering, and can actually lead to MORE mental health problems amongst your staff.

As a manager who's looking to build a team of confident, resilient, and high performing employees, who feel empowered in their work and life, that's the last thing you want!

#6

Encouraging medication as a treatment

While many people find relief through medication, clinical trials show that it can open a Pandora's box of side effects. Some of these side effects come with more dire consequences than the initial presenting condition. Many managers are not aware of this (and to be fair, it's not explained thoroughly in the glossy brochures).

Some of the more severe proven effects of psychiatric medications include higher suicide risk and risk of violence towards others. As a manager, can you afford to introduce such levels of unpredictability into your team? And if one of your team members chooses medication, as is their right, are you ready to monitor them? Monitoring is important for their safety and yours.

The literature contains evidence that ongoing use of psychotropic medication can in fact slow down the recovery of people with mental health problems, making the mental health problem last longer.

Rather than encouraging medication, managers should encourage the person to consider a range of options to address their mental health concerns.

#7

Using EAP and Leave as the default strategy

EAP and Leave are important tools in your mental health toolbox. However they are overly relied upon. Both tools, when used too often, send subtle but powerful messages to the broader workforce.

“We’ll arrange for EAP sessions for anyone with a mental health issue.”

Translation: *“We don’t want to, or know how to, deal with those kind of issues. Go speak to EAP. Please don’t involve me because I don’t know what to say.”*

“We will approve leave for people with a mental illness.”

Translation: *“There’s nothing wrong with the workplace, it’s all to do with you. Go take some time off and pull yourself together. Then come back when you’re ready to work.”*

Are these the types of messages going to get you the long term results you want? Granted, you are a manager, not a counsellor. And we encourage you to stay a manager.

We also know that a quality mental health education specifically tailored to managers will educate you in how to have those difficult conversations. While difficult, they are an opportunity to show leadership, not pass the buck.



Safeguard your organisation's mental health.

Contact us to discuss how.

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