Transcript

Safe Work Australia

Mental Health Issues

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**Presented by:**

**Adjunct Professor David Caple**, **MC**

Julie Hill  
Director, Strategic and Compensation Policy

**Panellists:**

Lucy Brodgen  
CEO, Mental Health Commission

**Dr Peter Cotton**Clinical and Organisational Psychologist

**Carolyn Davis**Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry

[*Opening visual of slide with text saying ‘Safe Work Australia’, ‘Virtual Seminar Series’, ‘Facts and fallacies behind mentally healthy workplaces’, ‘Presented by Lucy Brogden, Carolyn Davis and Dr Peter Cotton’, ‘seminars.swa.gov.au’, ‘#virtualWHS’*]

[*The visuals during this webinar are of each speaker presenting from lectern on stage whilst other speakers are seated, with reference to the content of a PowerPoint presentation being played on a large background screen*]

**JULIE HILL**:

Hello. I'm Julie Hill, the Director of Strategic and Compensation Policy at Safe Work Australia. I'd like to welcome our studio audience and those of you watching online to today's virtual seminar, Facts and Fallacies Behind Mentally Healthy Workplaces. It is an appropriate topic given that today is Mental Health Day. Before we start, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, the Ngunnawal people. I acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and to the region.

Our focus today is on what it really means to have a mentally healthy workplace, and hopefully to dispel some of the myths about what businesses need to do to comply with work health and safety laws. But first I would like to put the issue of mental health into a little bit of context. Mental illness is one of the leading causes of sickness absence and long-term incapacity in Australia.

With mental disorders often linked to other physical injuries, like musculoskeletal disorders, work-related mental illness has serious and far-reaching effects on the worker, their family, their colleagues, and of course the businesses in which they work. In the year to June 2015, there were 8,000 accepted workers’ compensation claims for mental disorders, and each year mental disorder claims result in $500 million in compensation paid.

Safe Work Australia appreciates the importance of explaining to businesses what they have to do to comply with their duties under the work health and safety laws, but also where those duties end. So for example, it might be great for workers' general well-being to make yoga available during lunch breaks, or to provide healthy diet information, but generally speaking, businesses do not *need* to do these things to comply with the work health and safety laws.

Instead, the focus should be on how to design good work and workplaces so that workers are not at risk of psychological harm, for example from constant overwork or being bullied by supervisors or co-workers. The starting point for creating a workplace which protects workers' mental and physical health is the work health and safety laws. Safe Work Australia as the national WHS policy body is currently developing national material on what the WHS and workers' compensation laws require in relation to mental health, to help businesses understand what compliance looks like.

Businesses will also need practical solutions and toolkits on how to avoid causing or exacerbating psychological illness, and then at the next level, moving the organisation to becoming a fully mentally healthy workplace. Given how common mental illness is, at one time or another we are all likely to work with people, or indeed ourselves experience periods of poor mental health. It is in everyone's interest to discuss this important topic, find out what we need to know and do and where to go for information and help.

Today we will hear from three panellists. Their full biographies are on our website, but let me introduce firstly the Mental Health Commissioner, Lucy Brogden. Lucy brings to the Commission extensive experience in psychology and has a strong commitment to helping others and building stronger communities. Lucy's primary area of focus are issues facing mental health and well-being, particularly in the workplace and the community. She takes an evidence-based approach to problem solving and social investment.

Our second panellist is Carolyn Davis, who until recently was Director Work Health Safety and Workers' Compensation Policy at the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Chamber's Safe Work Australia member. Carolyn has more than 20 years’ experience in work health and safety and workers' compensation management, policy, advocacy and implementation. She has held senior roles in major Australian companies and in academia, as well as running her own consultancy for many years. Carolyn is a strong advocate for managing risks as part of day-to-day business, and is passionate about sustainable businesses that value their people and have good systems in place to face the challenges of today.

Our third panellist is Dr Peter Cotton, a clinical and organisational psychologist who specialises in occupational mental health and how organisational environments influence staff well-being and performance outcomes. Peter is a respected advisor to both government and the corporate sector, including with the Victorian Transport Accident Commission, Work Safe Victoria and ComCare, Medibank, and in private practice.

Last but not least, let me introduce today's facilitator, Professor David Caple, who is an adjunct professor at the Centre for Ergonomics and Human Factors at La Trobe University in Melbourne, and senior research fellow from the Federation University in Ballarat, as well as past president of the International Ergonomics Association. David has over 30 years’ experience as an ergonomist consulting to businesses across a range of work health and safety areas and with clients all over the world. Please join me in welcoming our speakers.

[APPLAUSE]

Before we begin today's discussion, we're going to see a short video about the impact of mental health issues in the workplace. We would like to thank the University of Tasmania and their project partners, the Australian Research Council, beyondblue, WorkCover Tasmania, and the Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry for sharing this video with us. I'm informed the full DVD will soon be available from www.businessinmind.edu.au. So with no further ado, we'll see the video. Thank you.

[START OF VIDEO PLAYBACK]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

-You don't even know that you are utterly stressed until you go to the doctor and she takes your blood pressure and she says, ‘My gosh, you know, give up work tomorrow’. And you can't. I mean if you own a business, you can't just step out of it.

-Mental health is an issue that does need to be managed in any organisation, just as it needs to be managed in a family.

-I think the statistics are something like 20% of the population has some sort of mental stress at any one time. Then it has to impact on small business. And it's a significant part of, you know, trying to manage your staff.

-I’ve had depression for three years before I was diagnosed. I didn't understand what was going on with me, and it was having a terrible impact. I was barely getting by, and it scared me. It really did.

-Depression isn't something that just switches off at nine in the morning when you arrive at work and then comes back on at five in the afternoon.

-People that aren't managing their mental health well might be absent more often, and in a small business where there's only a couple staff members, if you've got someone off for long periods of time, you know, that has a big impact.

-The loss of productivity, particularly in a small to medium sized business, where it may well affect the business significantly, then there are real costs to that.

-There are other unquantifiable costs as well. The impact on relationships for example is something very important to business functioning.

-They may think it's just that the person is being contrary or difficult. It's often an issue which the business owner doesn't wish to broach.

-It's quite a challenge really. Obviously managers aren't psychologists.

-If I open that can of worms, it's like, well what do I do with it? So I'd rather let's just pretend it's not there. It's got nothing to do with me, and maybe they'll sort it out somewhere else.

-It was a learning curve for me, because I really didn't know where the boundary was. I wasn't sure what I could do and what I shouldn't do. But realising how important it is, is because each of the staff that we have, they're a critical part of the business.

[END PLAYBACK]

**DAVID CAPLE:**

So thank you for attending to share this story together today, and to explore some of those stories we've just seen on the video, with our three panel members. Welcome to the studio audience from me, and also to those that are watching online. Those of you who are online who would like to join asking some questions to our panel members, there are three ways that you can do that this morning.

One of them is using the #virtualWHS. The second is the #mentalhealth. And finally, you can just join the live chat facility. And the speakers will be available after the seminar too if you'd like to continue once we're done.

So with that as a contextual introduction, Lucy, with your background, particularly with the mentally healthy workplace alliance–

**LUCY BRODGEN**:

Yes.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Maybe you could share with us what some of the research has found and some of the future directions that you'd like to share with the audience today.

**LUCY BRODGEN**:

Sure David. I think one of the interesting things– the Alliance– Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance commissioned a literature review and a study of what's going on out there, and the thing that– the key message and take away for me from that message was that everything old is new again. And what is fascinating, and understanding the history of this topic, is that our own Elton Mayo, the polymath who came from Adelaide and went to work in Harvard in the 1920s, undertaking the Hawthorne studies– when they interviewed people back then working in the factories, the key things they said they wanted were their health, physical health to be good, and to be able to spend time with family. And today, when we go round and ask people what they want in the workplace, it's their health and work-life balance– to be able to pursue a life outside of work.

So in that respect, nothing has really changed. I think we've jumped from fad to fad, maybe innovation, some innovation, some good interventions, but we don't seem to be hitting the mark unfortunately. And I think we keep asking the question, and the question is not so much what, but how.

And the literature showed us that how– the key how– and it came in Julie's introduction– was good job and work design is the starting point. And if we start there, and with a value for good leadership and a value for good outcomes for people, that good work is good for you, then I think we hit the mark. We need to create cultures that are positive, transparent and open, and create a supportive environment for all our employees.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Okay. So Peter, you've done a lot of work in this area. What about your research? What are some of the key factors that you've found?

**PETER COTTON**:

Well, I probably echo what Lucy said. Everyone starts with mental health literacy, and there’s still a role obviously, the sort of programmes that beyondblue and Mental Health First Aid have championed in Australia over the last sort of 15 years. But beyond that, there's often an interest in doing something else, but there's a lot of uncertainty about what to do. And some organisations also are reluctant to go beyond a training solution, so they'll move on to the next fad, as Lucy said. You know, now we'll do mindfulness seminars and then we'll move on to individual resilience seminars. And it's all still piecemeal rather than sort of coordinated at a big picture level and integrated into the DNA of how the organisation actually operates. So that's the challenge, to really embed this stuff. That's an ongoing challenge.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Okay. We might explore that a bit further later on. Carolyn, just in terms of the legal context of where this sits, do you want to just tell us a bit about that?

**CAROLYN DAVIS**:

I think some of the people in that video highlighted how complex it can be, and how wary some employers are. I think businesses are faced with a range of legal requirements as much as, you know, they want to get the best out of their people and have a positive workplace, so they can all have a successful business and working life. But there's– so there's work health and safety. There's about five pieces of legislation. There's probably more, but there's the five that jump out at me.

So there's the work health and safety requirements. And that, as Julie said in her introduction, includes not just the physical requirements of the job, but also the psychological requirements of the job. And then there's the law around discrimination. Obviously you can't use any of that information to discriminate against people. You have to be very careful about how you go about this particular– you know– working with mental health in the workplace. There's also confidentiality and privacy.

And then there's some things under the Fair Work Act. You know, there's requirements about how you go about dealing with people, but there's also things about reasonable adjustments that you have to make. So it's a very complex environment that people work in, but I think the good thing about that is that you can take some simple steps. It doesn't have to be a very complicated response, so that even those small businesses in that video, there's some really simple things that they can do.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

So, maybe Lucy with your research on what some of those simple things might be– Julie mentioned at the front end that the fruit box and the lunchtime yoga may not be exactly hitting the mark– so what are some of those simple steps that organisations should be thinking about?

**LUCY BRODGEN**:

Absolutely, and I have been pushing the hashtag that it's more than yoga and fruit bowls, because I think if you're going down that path, you're really missing the point as to what this is all about. They *are* good for us. There's no argument around that. But this is much more than that. This is creating an environment that's positive for people, that is protective of people.

And so in terms of looking at those issues, it's really embracing a range of things that start with leadership at the top, and a vision for wanting to create a good, positive organisation that can contribute positively, and then working down through that, looking at the opportunities for all employees and the teams.

And it's interesting to see that that becomes a two-way conversation. And I think that's an important part of the dialogue, is that it needs to be an iterative process, where people are talking and evolving all the time. I think organisations that come from the industrial manufacturing sector, where they've had the focus on physical safety for a long time, are moving faster and probably better than perhaps those in professional services to do this.

But it's about being creative, and it's about looking to the evidence in the literature that is there, and not trying to re-invent the wheel all the time, but get the basics right. If we're complying around the legislation– which should be the minimum standard, not the maximum standard– then we can evolve on to the more creative elements of gyms and treadmills. But it's really for naught to have all those benefits if there's a culture of bullying or incivility operating at the same time.

I worked for a great boss who always reminded his direct reports that you're hiring competent people, and most people are able to make good and smart decisions on their own. If you treat people like children, they'll behave like children. So giving people some autonomy to set that direction, to have those conversations, is very powerful and empowering along that path. And starting to have that dialogue.

When you look at position descriptions and job descriptions, that comes to good job and work design. And we need to make sure that they are living documents that keep moving with the organisation, with the change, and focusing on teams as well as individuals in that context.

**CAROLYN DAVIS**:

Sorry.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Go ahead.

**CAROLYN DAVIS**:

Lucy and I talked about fruit boxes many, many times, because it is a fundamental distraction, and I'm very concerned that some businesses are plagued with people telling them that this is about compliance, that putting a fruit box in or doing a yoga class or having a running– I don't know whether you've seen those running desks where you can now work at your desk on a treadmill– that's just not what we're about. So it is wider than just the compliance. So those legal things I mentioned before, it's much wider than that. It's about working better, and it's about looking at a whole range of factors. And there are about eight work-related factors. Some people say there are six, but usually we use eight. And I think there's some information about those eight that Safe Work Australia have put out. So those eight factors are the things that I think are more helpful than the fruit boxes and the yoga. And what we're talking about is having a sustainable business. Some of those fads come and go.

**LUCY BRODGEN:**

That's right.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Yes.

**CAROLYN DAVIS:**

And doing that for a short period of time is not the answer.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

We'll explore those eight factors in a sec. Peter, you've introduced programmes in very big organisations. And what Lucy is talking about are some of the elements that need to be there, but what are the sort of steps and processes that– where do you start, and how do you ensure you've got the right infrastructure and you're not on wobbly foundations as you call it?

**PETER COTTON:**

Yes. Yeah. That was a section in our police review, building a house on wobbly foundations. If the underpinning sort of people leadership culture isn't in the right space, and teams aren't– various terms, psychosocial quality, or just climate, whatever– if they're not sort of fundamentally moving in the right direction, then a lot of those initiatives, training initiatives, etcetera, just don't get the traction that's indicated. So, ultimately then I think– and we did this with Vic Pol– because from a mental health perspective, it's about validating, encouraging, early help seeking. So barriers include various forms of stigma.

Historically in police services, people have been sidelined if they have genuine PTSD. It's poorly understood. So people– it can affect their career prospects. So we concluded that– and VEOHRC, Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, they did a review two months before us on sexual harassment and discrimination– came to the same conclusion that there needs to be, put in simple terms, a sort of leadership uplift or increase in people-focused leadership capability as a protective factor for when people deal with operational situations, etcetera.

So, all of those recommendations have been endorsed, and also by the Police Association, so they're currently sort of working through implementation.

I suppose certainly leadership from the top– Commissioner Graham Ashton's been very passionate about the space of occupational health and safety– that's what we still call it in Victoria– and absolutely transparent about the whole process, the whole VEOHRC process. It’s been very, very confronting. Those two reports are in the public domain so they are readily accessible on the Vic Pol website.

But that commitment, and EXCOM, the Executive Leadership Group, working with them in terms of expectations around role modelling, etcetera– one of the recommendations was also around when you do this stuff, there are some leaders who may not sort of make it up to the required level. So you have to have equitable processes in place for some of those leaders perhaps to move sideways to not having direct reports, because some leaders are just a bit too entrenched in their command and control style, whatever, and they can't make that shift.

But still, because historically we haven't dealt with them in terms of building their people skills, we have to have a supportive and reasonable way for them to transition. But some people will fall by the wayside, but that's ultimately how it has to be. And reducing the tolerance margins for poor behaviours.

**LUCY BRODGEN:**

And I think David it's important that we remember that we've got the legislative frameworks out there around a lot of these issues. But a number of the regulators have said quite publicly that having all those beautiful policies is one thing, but if they come into your organisation, they're going to be assessing the culture and the way things are actually done versus what the lovely policy manuals say.

And that can be quite a challenge for a number of organisations, to really entrench this issue. And I think what we find is whether people are coming in to look at issues around discrimination, whether it's diversity agendas, whether it's mental health in the workplace, the solutions and the strategies are the same, one and the same.

And so organisations that try and compartmentalise their approach to these things I think make a lot of unnecessary work for themselves. If you take that holistic approach of good work is good for you, that good organisations are good for people, and start there, you'll find that you're actually addressing a number of issues tackling this.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Okay.

**CAROLYN DAVIS:**

And it's good for business.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

We'll talk about how it's good for business and how do you measure that as we go. But Caroline, you mentioned the eight factors. So let's have a look at what those factors are. Maybe you could just highlight what are the key findings from the research of what makes a mentally healthy workplace.

**CAROLYN DAVIS:**

Well, I think these eight– and I said that some people use six of them– but these eight are sort of generally bandied around as things that we know are work related factors in this whole picture. So this is where the whole organisation needs to be able to look at these things. And some of these things give you a picture that you can measure, which we'll come to I know a little bit later.

So it's the demands of people's jobs. So it might be the workload or the work pattern, or it might be how you are going about that work. It's how much control that you have over your work.

And I think Peter was just saying if you don't feel that you can put your hand up or make any comments or make any changes, then you don't have a high level of control. So a low control level and a high demand contributes to quite a lot of difficulties in the workplace. Whether you've got the supports, whether you feel you can put your hand up.

And Peter referred to early interventions. And we know that from the research that this is a really key thing. So if your organisation has the opportunity to get in early and has the supports available, that can make a big difference.

And that doesn't just mean blocking on an employee assistance programme at the end. It also means integrating that with how you think about things in the workplace, and using that employee assistance programme as much as possible. So there are goods and bads. But lots of support.

It's also about relationships. Bullying is something that I think Peter and Lucy both mentioned. So the style of interactions, feeling that you are part of the workplace, that you are contributing to the workplace, that you are valued.

And one of the key things I keep coming back to is making a person feel valued and treating them with dignity and respect is very important to a sustainable business if nothing else.

Also about your role. Often you'll find people– particularly these days, we have a lot of position descriptions that outline what your work is about. And Lucy and I have talked about this before. Hands up anybody who works strictly to all of the things in their position description. I think, certainly in my role, five years ago when they wrote the position description, it has certainly changed from there. So I think it's important that there's a match between what you're expected to do, what your skills are, and how you can then go about it.

So there's a lot of sort of push about what to do in the workplace, whereas really it's about how. And I think Lucy and Peter and I were talking about this before.

It's also about how you manage change. So in this environment, work of the future, we're facing change all the time. So organisations have to be a bit cleverer about how they manage that change. And if you manage that poorly, you often get the results in the workplace.

Organisational justice– that you would be treated fairly in your organisation– is also terribly important. That if you do put your hand up to talk about mental illness, you don't want to be sidelined for that fact. That's part of that justice system.

And that there is recognition and reward, that you're not working ten times harder as someone else and they're getting all the accolades for it. You can only take that so far. So recognition and reward is also important.

There are probably others that people can think of, but they're the sort of eight that we know are key ones.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Lucy or Peter, do you want to comment or highlight any of those that you find dominate your research of where we're lacking?

**PETER COTTON:**

Perhaps just the relationships element. What we found through the police review and several other organisations I'm working with is that the organisation's values and behaviours, policy and practice piece is also absolutely critical.

If it's not in a right space– many of the police and emergency services organisations, for historical reasons, have a very wide tolerance margin for poor behaviours, and that directly creates a risk for psychological health and safety.

So reducing those tolerance margins– we hear constant comments about inconsistent management of behaviours or making exceptions. So getting into that space of consistent management, holding people accountable, frontline staff also feeling empowered so that they– because they're aware of the values and behaviours, they don't have to put up with stuff they may have historically. And so moving into that space.

Just very briefly, with Vic Pol, the VEOHRC– Human Rights Commission report was two months before us. We had about eight people come to us who said they were thinking of going to VEOHRC to tell their story, but they just dismissed it as another cynical sort of superficial exercise.

But in that intervening two months, they actually saw things starting to happen and they perceived that the ground was shifting, and some of the initiatives put in place, so they came to tell us their story. So that was very gratifying in terms of the shift that's actually occurring very rapidly.

**LUCY BRODGEN:**

And I think, if I could contribute on the recognition and reward– and going back to everything old is new again– if we look at, say, Herzberg's motivational factors, 50 years old, but as valid then as they are today.

And you meet a number of organisations and they'll say, ‘Oh, we just keep paying them more but they're not any happier’. Well, if you go to the literature, you'll know that that's not going to work. It might work for three months, but it's not lasting.

If we look at the other side of that, the recognition element, the continual feedback. And how many times do you say to managers, you know, ‘Are you giving them feedback?’ ‘Oh, they'll know they're doing a good job. We just tell them when they're doing a bad job.’

Well, the thing we know about people is we know when we're doing the bad job, but we would just kind of like to hear about when we're doing the good job. That kind of intervention is– kindness is a free thing. But it's actually a human interaction that goes to relationships as well. That a little bit of recognition goes a long way.

It troubles me a bit when you hear these organisations splashing headlines, ‘We've got rid of performance reviews,’ without actually putting any context around that. And what they're doing is maybe getting rid of the annual performance review, but hopefully replacing that with a more ongoing feedback process. And it's those skills that we need to train up in our young leaders and managers, to be able to give that ongoing feedback process.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Well, it's certainly stimulated some discussion online. So we've got a tweet coming through from Tony Vane.

‘There are usually three drivers for work, health, and safety improvements– laws, values, and financial. Of these, I think the legal compliance angle is very difficult to use when it comes to psychological risks, and there has been very little action from regulators in this area. So what does the panel think is the strongest driver?’

So Tony's highlighted the law, the values and the financial drivers. So who would like to have a go at Tony's question?

**LUCY BRODGEN:**

I'll jump in, sitting on the Alliance, and taking a cross-industry view. And what we've actually found is it's horses for courses. And some organisations, some industries, are motivated by a very compliance view of the world, and they like to be up to date.

And I think that comes from particularly the manufacturing, industrial sectors that have come from that strong safety, physical safety background, and they like to be up to date and they understand the importance of that.

There are organisations that are very values driven. And you speak to CEOs who want to do the right thing, they're desperate, but they're losing sleep over the how side.

And equally, I come from an investment banking background where a risk argument resonates with them. That's their language of business.

So I think it's really understanding the industry and the organisation, and what message will get through and work best with them.

**CAROLYN DAVIS:**

And I think it's important— sorry David– I think it's really important, there's no silver bullet, there's no one answer. It has to be what works for your organisation, what works for your relationships, what works for your values. So there is no one answer. There is no strongest driver, really. It's how it works for you and for your organisation.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Okay, thanks. Thanks, Tony.

**PETER COTTON:**

I was just gonna say–

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Pardon?

**PETER COTTON:**

Oh? No?

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Go on, Peter.

**PETER COTTON:**

The other thing I've noticed too is that a lot of boards are becoming very sensitive to reputation damage. So there's a downward driver from boards. We've had very prominent sexual harassment, discrimination, bullying cases in the media. So I think that's another driver that I see happening in a lot of sectors.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

The directors themselves.

**PETER COTTON:**

Yes.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Okay, we have another question coming up now from Kathy.

‘I have a staff member who I think has a mental health issue, but I don't want to intrude or invade in her privacy. How best to approach that?’

**CAROLYN DAVIS:**

Can I kick that one off? Look, I think this is a major issue. Certainly I work for an employer association, the Australian Chamber. We have 300,000 organisations that are members of ours. So they get quite a lot of questions. They get a lot of input from particular businesses.

And the question that comes up continually is ‘How do I go about this?’– this is where we were going before— ‘What is the best way to raise this conversation?’ And I think this is the really important part. There is a whole lot of information, particularly on the Heads Up website.

If I can just backtrack a little bit, I'm also part of the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance with Lucy. And one of the things that we supported in the last couple of years was an initiative called the Heads Up programme that's been run by beyondblue. They did a lot of work with some of our businesses as well.

So we've done a lot of work with them on how to have that difficult, or not so difficult conversation. And there's a lot of stuff on the Heads Up website about looking at the pros and cons of divulging or disclosing to your employer how you feel or what you think might impact on your work, and then some of what the employer can do, right down to some of the sort of terminology to keep in mind. Because that initial response is obviously going to set the scene. So we think there's a lot of tools on the Heads Up website to be able to help you look at what would work for you, obviously, and be flexible in how you approach that. But there's quite a lot of information and tools on that website.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Thanks. And it's interesting as we're going along, these resources and tools are starting to emerge. So you mentioned the Heads Up website. You've got your own Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance website.

**LUCY BRODGEN**:

It's the same.

**CAROLYN DAVIS**:

That's why I started with the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance. We're not trying to just promote a particular tool. That Alliance website is meant to be a sort of go to point for a whole lot of tools and things. We felt that the work that was being done on the Heads Up website was a good place to start. So there's other tools on there as well.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

And the eight factors that we've just been talking about are available on the Safe Work Australia website if you want to explore those a bit further.

So Peter, let's just talk a bit about some case studies. So you've been involved in the emergency services as you've mentioned. Do you want to highlight what are some of the key things that have led to the positive response, and any data that you might have about measures of what's been going on?

**PETER COTTON**:

Okay. Just very quickly to go back to the last question, I was going to add, and we talked about this earlier, that it's not about managers becoming diagnosticians or quasi-counsellors. It's about what you do as a people leader. And when you sort of make that differentiation, it is pretty clear cut.

And the other thing that gets a lot of take up that I talk about with leaders is about the role of the leader in fostering a team climate that's supportive of well-being.

So I don't want all my team meetings to be an endless list of admin matters that we tick off. Every few team meetings I'm going to quarantine a bit of time for the team to have a bit of reflection and free flowing discussion on how we're travelling as a team. And I'm going to message that well-being's on my radar, and encourage people to come and talk to me if they have any hassles.

We know when leaders do that, people are more likely to go to the EAP and more likely to put their hand up earlier. And you get less push-back if as a leader you initiate a conversation, because you've set up the climate where people feel that well-being is part of the way we do business.

Sorry, back to Vic Pol. I think partly Vic Pol is in a really ripe space. They've got a Chief Commissioner who's been very passionate about workplace health and safety, occupational health and safety. The VEOHRC review was extremely confronting if you go and read it. Talked about rampant everyday sexism, had some dreadful case studies that have put lots of people's mental health at risk.

We came in on the tail end, so two months later we started. So strong commitment from EXCOM, the Executive Command Leadership Group, and the occupational health and safety senior leadership.

So the other starting point which is happening across a lot of police and emergency services organisations is around the issue of suicide. Very confronting, very harrowing for people. We've had a few high profile suicides in Vic Pol.

Our police minister, Wade Noonan, took leave for a genuine episode of vicarious trauma after he said he could no longer cope with some of the material coming across his desk from Vic Pol.

So all those sort of fed in to getting the process going. The Police Association under Ron Iddles has been fabulous. So in lock step with senior executive and the Police Association, we made 39 recommendations. They've endorsed them all, and they’re currently working on implementation.

So we figure between VEOHRC and us there's little sort of room for wiggle. They kind of have to implement substantial stuff. They've got dedicated funding, it's beyond business as usual, and the whole culture change process. Defence has been going through this. They're now in their second iteration. And if you go to their website, they've got a very good summary document called Pathways to Change. And it's about their sort of summary of the culture change that has to happen in order to support a range of standard mental health type initiatives.

So they're a bit further along in the journey. But to their credit, Vic Pol took on board that it's not about implementing just another training solution, it's about implementing, underpinning very substantial leadership culture change.

And so that includes changes to things like promotional criteria and processes, so that the message gets out about what the organisation values. And as we said earlier, it's about factoring more in how we achieve our objectives, not just what we actually achieve. So getting that balance better.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Okay. Thank you. Lucy, what about some of the case studies you've been involved with?

**LUCY BRODGEN**:

I’ve been really privileged to see a range of things. I've seen a lot of things that don't work, but I'm always struck by the things that work well.

And picking up on one of the points that Peter's made, these kind of programme changes need to be right across the lifespan of the employee or the organisation. And we often see organisations may be changing a bit around a recruitment practice or a job design element, but it doesn't go the full spectrum of the role.

And one of the great examples that I've heard and I've seen in operation now is that Optus has now flipped the EAP service in a way, and actually made using the EAP manager assist line for managers a KPI, that managers need to report and demonstrate that they're using that manager assist line.

Because what Optus recognised is that all managers will encounter difficult situations at work and situations that they don't know how to handle. So that it's actually a sign of strength and good management to recognise that, pick up the phone to the EAP and outline the issue, and try and work out a strategy for handling that.

And I think that's a really quite game-changing approach to using the EAP and the manager assist tool. We see organisations like Lendlease, who are coming from a diversity perspective and a safety perspective, but wanting to get more women on to construction sites, and really grappling with job and work design and cultural change pieces to achieve that.

And these aren't necessarily easy approaches, but that's a message that's come from the CEO. And so they're working on that and challenging all aspects of the organisation in terms of how do we make this happen. So I think it's those good opportunities that we see.

And a lot of it comes from a cultural change perspective if you look at the essence of what's going on, and particularly, ’We don't like where we're at. We need to get to a new place.’

**DAVID CAPLE:**

So Carolyn, Lucy mentioned about construction. Do you want to talk about–

**CAROLYN DAVIS**:

No, that's a good segue. Can I just go back two steps?

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Sure.

**CAROLYN DAVIS**:

I just want to re-emphasise that we're not expecting people in the workplace to diagnose. Because I think that's one of the key things you can overstep. So absolutely do not diagnose.

But you can, especially if you've got a good relationship– so you should be aware of your team of people, as Peter was saying. Be involved with them, know them. You can ask questions about performance and about the workplace. So, you know, you can ask about what assistance. You can sort of go down the paths about adjustments. And there's a whole lot of areas that you can get into, but you're not expected to be diagnosing.

And the second one was, I have– like fruit boxes, I have this thing about well-being as well, because I think well-being means different things to different people. And there are a lot of providers out there who are in the well-being market. And I think that that's distracting as well. It's not necessarily a business's role to worry about your happiness. And there's a happiness group of– team of people or systems out there.

So that is distracting from all of the things that I think you can do in the workplace. And although Lucy mentioned some of those big businesses, there's also small businesses that can take small steps.

So I guess one of the things that come to mind– and this isn't exactly– this is a conglomerate based on some of the feedback that I've got from our businesses. But Sarah is a construction site supervisor, she's got some issues at home. And what she's grappling with is there’s this big demand coming up for her workplace where it's quite critical, time critical– pouring concrete, something like that– as part of the whole process. And so she's worrying about the commitment to that and what she can do to balance the things that she needs to do at home as well.

She's got quite a good relationship with her boss, her supervisor if you like. And they've worked on sharing some responsibilities before. So she actually decides because that's a good relationship that she will have a discussion with her boss.

And it turns out that the boss was not just happy to talk about ideas that she might have had, but also to add some in there.

So you know, changing the times. I think they talked about could she come in perhaps a lot earlier, sit down quietly, get through what needed to be done, and set things in train for the day. That would help her miss some of the terrible things that were happening at home. There were other days where she thought she could perhaps stay later and come in later, and that that might work with the work schedule.

So between them they sort of worked out a way of balancing the times. And that's some of those eight factors that you can do.

There was also do things by email more than they were already doing. They found a quiet place, a sort of office in the corner where they could both go to talk about things, or she could go to talk on the phone or just to take a deep breath.

So all of those things really helped. And it meant that the employee, Sarah, was much more comfortable in dealing with her stuff that she needed to deal with at home. She didn't have to divulge anything about what was actually happening at home, and the supervisor didn't need to get involved in what was going on.

But he was able to retain good staff. And from his point of view, he'd actually had a very stressful time a couple of years ago, and that hadn't been managed terribly well for him. He wanted to go on leave, and he was keen to see Sarah take on more responsibilities and be around. And he was able to take his leave.

So I think there are lots of quiet success stories that are not necessarily labelled mental health stories or psychological health stories, but they are just about dealing with people in the workplace.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

It's the respect–

**CAROLYN DAVIS**:

With dignity and respect.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Exactly. Well, let's– we've got a couple more questions coming through from the Tweet line. So this one's from Amy.

‘How can a company demonstrate they care about employee mental health and are just not trying to comply or just to look good?’

Lucy?

**LUCY BRODGEN**:

Well, I think it goes to so many of the things that we have been talking about in the conversation thus far. If it's actually about posters in kitchens and things like that, then you're probably missing the point.

It's actually the action that's saying ‘If we're going to do an engagement survey, we're going to follow it through with some real action’. It's having those conversations about people's roles, regular feedback, looking at the eight functions, factors that we've already discussed, and being able to demonstrate true action around a lot of those issues.

I think if you're blowing the trumpet, then you're often probably not doing a lot of other action.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Sure. Thanks, Amy. We'll just move on, and just back to the panel for a couple more questions if we may.

So we've talked about what it is, what the research tells us, the elements of a good programme. But let's talk about success measures, and how do we measure success in this topic.

So Lucy, psychometric testing has often been discussed as a measure of success, but there's quite a lot of debate about the validity of that. Do you want to just share with us some of the thinking in that space?

**LUCY BRODGEN**:

Absolutely. Having a real passion for organisational psychology, I believe that there is a terrific contribution that psychometric testing can bring to a workplace. I think around recruitment, leadership development needs, etcetera, it has a strong place.

What troubles me is when I see organisations trying to take those tools that have been developed for one purpose and extrapolate them over to do other things that they're just not designed for.

And I teach organisational psychology to third-year students, many of whom are going on to HR and other areas, and I say to them, ‘Please remember one thing. Even if you can't remember what the definitions are, but ask on any intervention that's being brought to you, what's the reliability of it and the validity of it.’

And chances are a lot of those consultants will leave the room when you ask that question, because they haven't done that necessary psychometric analysis around the testing. But the testing can be great for job and organisational fit purposes. It can be helpful in how to manage that person. But going beyond that, I think we have to be very careful how testing is used.

I think engagement surveys have been the flavour of the month for a long time. But again, I would talk about using them with a lot of caution. It's interesting to see that in times of high unemployment, we often see engagement very high and think that we're doing something great. Well, if actually you've got nowhere to go, then you will express an intention to stay where you are.

Conversely, when unemployment is at a low rate, generally we see engagement scores decreasing and organisations scratching their heads. But that's because our employees have a choice about where they'll be. So I think we need to understand how we use these tools, and really think about what we're asking of our employees.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

So Peter, what sort of data have you seen with outcomes of the programmes you've been involved with?

**PETER COTTON**:

Well, look, the Vic Pol one's early days, because we finished the review and they’re now putting together an implementation strategy. One of the metrics of monitoring success looks like it may be a sort of sample of staff surveyed every six months with questions about what do they observe about changes in behaviour or do they feel safer, also around to what extent would they feel confident that they'd be well-supported in the workplace if they or a colleague had a mental health issue. So sort of tapping into that sort of perception, which goes a little bit towards sort of Maureen Dollard's type psychosocial safety climate type approach. You know, your perception of how supportive the organisation is in looking after people's psychological health and safety.

Surveys have a role too, but the thing with surveys, exactly as Lucy said, is that it's not so much doing a survey, it's how you implement it. And you have to have a bottom up engagement strategy. People need to have a say. They need to own the data.

So if it's top down driven, it all falls flat and then it goes on the bookshelf and we do another survey in a year or two years. And you know, nothing's really changed.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Okay. See if we can squash in a few more questions. We've got some more online, but I’d just open to the audience to see if anybody in the audience would like to ask a question. So if you could just stand up and introduce yourself and your question, thanks.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:**

Thanks David. Lizzy Smith. I'm an ergonomist, and previously had experience with integrated worker health. And I heard the word integration mentioned a few times.

It strikes me that we're missing a member on the panel which is representing the HR networks, which drive a lot of the tone and the culture, and certainly the experience of processes. Would you have any comments on how practitioners can help influence HR networks.

**LUCY BRODGEN**:

Absolutely. And I spent time in HR myself, and teaching organisational psychology to students going into HR roles, what I'm struck by, I guess, generally is the poor quality of training we give to HR practitioners around a lot of these issues.

So it's not mandatory to do the org psych component in the HR degree at the university I teach at. Yet at the same time, those people are managing the use of, say, psychometric testing. So they don't understand the role that it plays or how it necessarily fits. Job and work design is not trained in those areas.

So I think we actually need to look at how we can help the HR teams in organisations with a lot of this work, and where does it fit within an organisation. It pops up in various places, in corporate strategy functions from time to time, business process re-engineering jumps in.

And it's important that we get the right people at those tables when those conversations are going on in terms of human capital management strategies, and who is actually part of that strategy.

**CAROLYN DAVIS**:

And just remember it's a holistic approach to these things, and not all small businesses have a HR department or anything like that.

So really, it's about having an understanding of those skills. So one of the things that's important for a business these days is to be aware, and have some information, some evidence if you like, behind what they want to do. Give them some confidence about dealing with these sort of tricky, complex issues. So it may not need a whole HR department to do all those things.

**LUCY BRODGEN**:

And one of the great things that we're seeing is that the industry groups supporting small business are recognising this and buying in some of those services and supports that their members can then access, which is what ACCI does and the housing industry associations are doing and things like that.

So you may be a small organisation and thinking ‘Where do I go?’ and the industry body is a great starting point.

**CAROLYN DAVIS**:

That was my line Lucy!

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Thanks Lizzy, for the question. We've got another one come through online. This is from a cattle producer.

‘Can the take away messages from this discussion be applied to far remote operators in the agri foods industry? For example, are mental health services able to be provided? Would online employee assistance programmes be effective? Internet speed was not such an issue.’

So thank you. This looks like a remote worker industry.

**LUCY BRODGEN**:

Absolutely. And I cannot remember the organisation based in Victoria, but they're doing a lot of agri business work.

**CAROLYN DAVIS**:

There's a lot of work actually on how digital technology needs to go into this space, particularly for young people. So is it Reach Out that's done a lot of work on how we communicate with young people, and that the digital sphere is absolutely where we need to be with this. And I think those things still apply in remote areas as well.

**LUCY BRODGEN**:

So in Victoria, the Farming Agriculture Unit is doing a lot of work on this issue. Equally, the Mental Health Commission is doing a lot of work with the Department of Health on the technology gateway around health based interventions and working with remote communities.

Certainly internet speed is an issue. But there are some creative solutions coming up around that. Generally schools and some community centres have a bigger pipe than the average person, so it might be that you visit a hub to access some of these services.

There's a lot of app-based tools that are very effective for people to use. And it's certainly being recognised that remote workers, whether it's mining, agriculture, whatever it might be, need support, and a special kind of support.

**CAROLYN DAVIS**:

And it's sharing. So again, whether that's a network like the employer associations– so your industry association would be a good place to start. But also just to know that there are other people with the same sort of issues in your industry, and you can share resources or share ideas or share across the network. That makes a big difference to remote areas too.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Okay. Thank you. One last online question and then back to the audience here.

‘What does the panel suggest we do to improve the culture of an organisation that continues to be faced with significant changes in regards to workers' mental health?’

Maybe Peter, you could solve that for Ashley.

**PETER COTTON**:

Certainly the Workers' Comp authorities see blips on the radar when there's major organisational change processes occurring, so there are always impacts on people. I'm not sure exactly what the question is getting at, but I would have to say that not every case has a happy ending. With my clinical hat on, I do lots of what I call fitness for duty assessments. We see people where the referral question is ‘We have this person. We know they're getting treatment, they've got some sort of condition. But it's going on and on and on and on. We're more than 12 months down track. Is it going to improve? Is it going to change, is this the way things are?’ So sometimes things end up in a tough space, where– and this is a very small proportion of people, but you're talking about options like medical ill health retirement, permanent change of job, etc.

So it's not always a happy ending. We'd like it to be always a happy ending, but it can't always be a happy ending.

Cultures– when there's a better culture, it helps to manage change more effectively. So there is a link with the organisational culture and change. But sorry, Lucy was going to say something.

**LUCY BRODGEN**:

And I think what we touched on earlier– and Peter made the point around the significance of culture and boards starting to look at this– the reputational risk issues are quite significant. And most organisations function on a front page of the *Financial Review* test, and that test is getting broader and broader as to what will get you on the front page of the *Financial Review*. And you don't want to be there. And you want to be there for the right reasons, not the wrong reasons.

And we talked about the regulators have recognised the power of culture. And it's interesting that this has promoted a lot of debate through directors and senior management as to whose responsibility culture is. And I think it's kind of telling that in 2016 we're debating who owns culture when that's been so integral to good business for such a long time, and no one's actually ever wanted to own it. And now they're scrambling around it.

**CAROLYN DAVIS**:

Small business, sorry. Can I just do the small business–

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Can you make this– weave this into your summary comment, that would be great.

**CAROLYN DAVIS**:

So for a small business– I mean that works for a big business, but for a small business it can be as simple as writing things down. So if you are having that discussion with somebody in the workplace, then drawing up a sort of written plan about how you're going to make those adjustments. This is all part of a normal returning to work plan. So the same sort of principles apply. You can put that in writing. And sometimes that gradually helps build up a change in the culture.

That wasn't my three points though David. I'm sorry, I’m going to have to come back.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Okay, Peter. We need to wrap up. We've only got a couple of minutes to go. So things that we haven't talked about? Or facts or fallacies–

**PETER COTTON**:

Probably the one thing I was going to add was just the increasing recognition of the role of workplace support, quite distinctly from any clinical management treatment in helping people return to work and recovery from exposure to traumatic events.

In my experience, a lot of managers still operate on this sort of tacit division. They have focus on the work group outputs, KPIs. When it's clinical medical issues, they handball it to the EAP providers, etc. But there's now oodles of evidence that that role of workplace support is a critical determinant of outcomes, quite distinctly from all the medical and clinical treatment people get.

There's a volume of essays that came out in just the last month in September from Australia21 on PTSD, and there's an essay in there that elaborates on that issue of the role of workplace support.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Okay. Last point, Lucy?

**LUCY BRODGEN**:

Well, I think it's fantastic that we're actually having sessions like this. Ten, 15 years ago, mental health in the workplace was just– you didn't go there. You pretended that it wasn't an issue and you moved on. So the fact that we can have these conversations is fantastic.

I think we do need to get the language right around a lot of these topics. I think we need to break down the fear that goes with that, that this is not hard necessarily. It takes effort, but it's not expensive generally.

There's no cost to kindness. And I think that can be the starting point for a lot of this, is to build up some kindness, some empathy, dignity, respect. There's no cost to those things. And so people shouldn't be scared with embracing this and starting on the challenge.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Carolyn?

**CAROLYN DAVIS**:

Don't be scared. I think that's it. Use as much information and the tools that are available to give yourself confidence to deal with this in a very simple way. It doesn't have to be a big deal.

There's no right answer either. So a lot of what you want to– or a lot of what you see, you need to take it on board and be flexible with how you adapt that into your workplace. So every workplace is different, every individual is different. So don't think there is a single blanket answer. It's something that you tailor for your own workplace.

And I guess don't be frightened of it. I think it's something that needs to be addressed.

**DAVID CAPLE:**

Thank you. So I'd like to draw this seminar to a close. And for those that are online, you can continue in the chat room for as long as you wish, and engage directly with the panel members.

And apologies to the people in the audience. We didn't have enough time to ask for more questions. But you too can stay around and chat as well. So on behalf on Safe Work Australia, I'd like you to join me and thank Lucy and Carolyn and Peter for a fantastic seminar today.

Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

[*Closing visual of slide text saying ‘Brought to you by Safe Work Australia,’, ‘Virtual Seminar Series’, ‘seminars.swa.gov.au’, ‘#virtualWHS’*]

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