

[• Article](#) [• Leadership](#)

Why Mental Health Conversation Competence is Critical For Leaders' Success

BY FLEUR HEAZLEWOOD

SEP 14, 2023 • 5 MIN READ

Empowering Leaders to Foster Psychological Safety and Mental Wellbeing in the Workplace

Rising levels of stress, burnout and mental illness mean mental health conversation skills are no longer a nice-to-have, but necessary. Leaders are expected to provide psychologically safe and mentally healthy working environments yet often lack the skills and training to support the wellbeing of their people.

[The Australian Productivity Commission's Inquiry](#) into Mental Health recommended in 2020 a series of reforms across workplace, schools and community services to improve people's mental health and ability to participate and prosper in our country. This was enacted with the April amendments to the Work Health and Safety Act which now requires organisations and leaders are now required to provide both a psychologically safe working environment and manage psychosocial hazards. This includes providing a healthy working environment, actively managing the work causes of stress before they get out of hand and providing support for mental health issues.

We are not currently managing psychological safety well

Mental health is a safety risk in the workplace with over [90% of Australia's mental health compensation claims linked to work-related stress or mental stress](#). The three most common causes of mental stress are preventable and relate to a lack of psychological safety at work: work pressure, work-related harassment and/or bullying, and exposure to workplace or occupational violence. We are also seeing [increased numbers of people experiencing chronic stress and burnout](#). Gallup research reveals the top five factors that correlate most to employee burnout:

- Unfair treatment at work.
- Unmanageable workload.
- Unclear communication from managers.
- Lack of manager support.
- Unreasonable time pressure.

Ignorance of mental health skills is no longer an excuse

While the signs for mental ill health are not easy to see, mental health challenges are natural and common, not a niche issue to delegate to Human Resources. [Mental Health First Aid Australia](#) research shows that at least one in five people in our teams right now are experiencing a diagnosable mental illness. [More than 50% of people](#) with a common, diagnosable mental illness do not receive professional help. So, people are struggling on their own who don't need to be. And research shows that the earlier someone connects with help, the easier and shorter their healing journey is likely to be.

Mental health conversation competence is critical for leader success

Most of us move into leadership and management roles with clarity around the strategies, targets, projects and results we are expected to deliver. There is an investment in training for induction and then ongoing time dedicated to work-in-progress meetings, either one-on-one or in teams, and the performance expectations come with a range of measures for assessing our levels of performance and success.

Less explicit and often more informal, unwritten and unmeasured is an assumption that we will also manage the wellbeing of our team within the cracks of our leftover time. But when we don't manage the interpersonal dynamics well, leave those who are unwell to struggle, allow interpersonal conflict to fester or accept poor performance, we undermine both our own health and performance and that of our overall team. A mentally healthy environment is one in which leaders protect, respond to, and promote mental health for their people.

While burnout and mental health issues have traditionally been viewed as an individual's problem to manage, the reality is that these won't be solved without leaders proactively managing a healthy working environment. This means mitigating the risk of psychosocial hazards by ensuring your people have the clarity, prioritisation, training, support, resources, knowledge, feedback, and supervision they require to perform their jobs healthily and well.

This is still an emerging area of organisational and leadership development. Winc is an organisation that I work with that understands that mental health and wellbeing is a core part of a leader's role. Winc has trained all people managers in Mental Health Mastery Conversation Skills and has a trained Mental Health First Aid representative across all geographical locations and shifts.

Recognise and respond to early warning signs

The most common challenges I hear is a lack of competence and confidence in recognising the signs someone is struggling, providing psychological safety, knowing what to say, how to respond when someone isn't ok, what is appropriate support, and how to manage both care and performance.

When we see someone struggling, we need to reach out and make the effort to connect. We don't have to be experts in mental health to have a caring conversation that connects someone who needs help to support. Someone experiencing mental illness will, most of the time, function well at work with support and professional help.

The good news is that mental health and wellbeing literacy is something that can be learned and added to our leadership skills toolkit. It also provides us with a performance advantage. In 2017 I partnered with ITW Construction for a whole of workplace [resilience and wellbeing capability building program](#) as the foundation for creating a positive, healthy, high-performance culture. Icare sponsored the evaluation which was complete with a team at the University of Melbourne which showed significant reductions in safety issues, absenteeism and turnover while achieving revenue and market share growth.

There are upsides to upskilling our mental health literacy

When we provide a psychologically safe environment at work all of our team members are able to contribute and do their best. Mental health conversation competence strengthens relationships with and within teams, leads to increased trust, improved communication, collaboration, and overall performance. The more openly team members are able to discuss issues as they arise, admit mistakes, and ask for help, the less likely that mental health and wellbeing challenges will turn into performance problems. And research clearly shows that people who feel valued and supported at work perform better, are more engaged and stay longer. To put it simply, people who are well do well.

Edited by: **Kiran Tuljaram**

SHARE THIS



LEADERSHIP • TAGS: Mental Health, Executing Leadership, Competence, Resilience, Empathy, Wellness, Leadership & Development (L & D), Psychological Safety



Fleur Heazlewood in

Fleur Heazlewood is a leadership expert, speaker, facilitator and founder of the [Blueberry Institute](#) and author of *Leading Wellbeing - A leaders guide to mental health conversations at work*.