

## Carrying 'ME' Around

I would like to think that we have come a long way when it comes to supporting staff that are going through difficult life situations. Eleven years ago when my mother passed away, I took two days off. One day to attend the funeral and another day to recover. I found however that I needed an extra day and called my manager to discuss this. I was advised that I was needed at work and that I was letting the organization down at a very busy time. Unfortunately, it has been in my experience that most organizations are still struggling with how to tackle the need for effective strategies in the workplace to deal with any form of mood disorder. Given that the statistics show that more and more people are taking time off due to emotional or mental breakdown that is resulting in huge costs not only in our economic, but social and healthcare systems, this is certainly an area that every organization needs to look at carefully.

Lack of knowledge and understanding play a big part in an organization's ability to effectively manage such issues. The stigma surrounding mental health (mood disorders) means many people are still in the dark, and therefore those needing help often hide away there too. It took us a long time as a nation to accept people with physical disabilities and pave a way for them to not only enter the workforce but also have their needs and requirements factored into our social and town planning.

Given the stigma and lack of understanding and acceptance around mental health, I feel it is fair to say that we have a very long way to go in order to make the necessary changes required in this area. Nonetheless, our past proves that progress although at times slow, does happen and this is certainly an area that needs our attention.

Given the stigma surrounding mood disorders it is often difficult to identify when hiring staff, hence early detection by managers and/or supervisors is very important. However, given that in Australia more often than not people are put in these positions with very little leadership training, it is difficult to expect that these same people would have the necessary skills to be able to address this area effectively without any training and support. Whether or not these skills are added to these roles descriptions in the future is something that should be noted for future consideration. Right now however, it is important and wise for these positions to at least be well informed about mood disorders, how to detect the problem and ways to manage it.

In today's current social climate it is vital to be informed about mood disorders, especially if you want to be an effective leader, manager, parent, or friend. Dealing with any type of mood disorder in the workplace is important, particularly if you are responsible for growth, learning and development for others and yourself. Often the issues are left unaddressed for way too long which result in a lose/lose situation for the organization and the staff member.

Often people can be unaware of their own underlying issues and will use a wide range of ineffective coping mechanisms to alleviate the stress or feeling of not being able to cope. Once these behaviors spiral out of control it is often difficult to assist effectively, that is why early detection is imperative. We may not be responsible for how and why the problem arose, however to ensure also that other staff are not negatively impacted to a point of isolating and gossiping about an individual, then we do need to

have some responsibility within the workplace for identifying such issues and then have effective strategies to manage them. Left to spiral out of control an individual falls into deeper and deeper levels of self-hatred, despair, guilt and shame as their days become unmanageable. Then the person has no other choice than to rely on the natural human tendency to want to cover up the issue, blame, justify and lie in order to protect themselves. This really is such an important area of concern, without proper assistance mood disorders spill over into all sorts of costs affecting not only the workplace, but families and communities as individuals become more and more stressed, tired and overwhelmed.

I believe the three major areas we need to look within the workplace:

- (1) Staff training & education
- (2) Management training and education
- (3) Organizational culture

Within these areas what needs to be incorporated is a holistic or ontological approach in managing self and managing people. Long gone are the days where we could get away with saying “leave your problems at the door”. We all know that no matter who you are, you usually “CARRY YOU AROUND WITH YOU” and that most people are not able to separate themselves so much so that they can come to work without their problems. Gone also are the days of authoritative leadership styles, this needs to be replaced by a relational approach to leading, particularly given that ‘depression’ is one of the biggest problems facing not only those trying to run a business, but our society as a whole. The days of “do this or you’re out”, either/or mentality, requires a shift in our thinking, attitudes and approaches to managing people, into a mentality that looks at and embraces people as a whole and is able to address them in such a way. This does not mean we ‘go all soft’ and assume responsibility for someone else’s life, but it does mean that we look at people in a way that identifies their strengths and weaknesses and makes the most of their strengths, whilst being able to develop and encourage staff in a way that makes them want to seek to improve the areas that don’t work.

How do we do this?

- Build a an organizational culture of awareness and trust
- Redesign values at all levels of the organization and not just pay lip service to these, putting up pretty posters, people need to learn to live these values
- Have team agreements that are put in place to support and protect staff
- Make communication & honesty a high priority value in the organization –include it in criteria when hiring managers, supervisors and staff
- Education, understanding, compassion – people are able to accept and work better when they have the full picture – this eradicates fears, false assumptions and judgments.

- Front line managers/supervisors need to have well defined strategies that are backed by the policies and procedures of the organization. They also need to be effective in giving & receiving feedback and designing plans for development of staff.
- Work/Life balance needs to be part of the organization's values –people above profits, invest in people and you are guaranteed profits.
- Leaders need to be taught new ways of speaking and listening. Technical ability and high IQ are determining factors for promotion even when emotional intelligence may be lacking, and they allow 'themselves' to get in the way of managing staff. Leadership training needs to cover self-assessment and understanding.
- Organizations should look at making sure that their discrimination policy supports staff and that they have an Employee Assistance Program in place
- Become innovative – the usual team building/team bonding activities do little to address underlying human issues that affect their ability to function effectively in the workplace

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Establish national advisory team that helps organizations build a culture of awareness in regards to mental /emotional health specific to them. A national program named "Carrying ME around", that aims at educating staff at all levels of the organization about mood disorders, and most importantly providing holistic/ontological training to help individuals know themselves better and hence better understand the needs of those they work with in order to create the shift from 'either/or' to a culture that asks the hard questions, is willing to look at the person from a deeper understanding and embrace people as a whole, providing solutions, not band aids or firing staff.

## CONCLUSION

We don't only have many competing demands, but many competing voices within or own minds. When we put all our competing voices together with all the other peoples' competing voices/personalities it can become chaotic. I believe that everyone suffers from some type of mood disorder in their life and the impact ranges from slight to severe, as we all carry fragmented personalities around in this package called ME.

If we don't have some understanding of ourselves and ability to listen and check in with what we are experiencing, then how can we understand others? If we can't manage our own lives, then how are we to manage others? To effectively manage people we do need to look beyond the typical leadership skills that are used to promote and hire our leaders. Self -awareness, self-realization and mindfulness need to be added to the list. The more emotionally and mentally aware our leaders become, and the more we can educate staff about themselves as a whole being, the more we will find that our solutions become more effective. People that understand themselves are able to find creative solutions based on empathy, compassion, knowledge and understanding whilst still being able to balance the demands of the workplace.