

How to Make the Business Case for “Psychological Safety”



Sadly, it often takes tragedy to recognize and resolve to fix the flaws in our safety laws. One of those “ah-ha” moments took place in Ottawa on April 7, 1999, when after years of being harassed at work, transit worker Pierre Lebrun finally snapped and went on a shooting rampage, killing four co-workers before turning the gun on himself. While the so-called OC Transpo massacre didn’t “invent” workplace violence, it raised awareness of the problem. Over the coming decades, provinces would change their Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) laws to require employers to address it.

Workplace Violence Is the Symptom, Not the Disease

While requiring employers to deal with workplace violence and harassment represents progress, it hasn’t snuffed out the problem. The problem is that the current OHS laws don’t address the root cause of the problem, namely, the behaviours and psychological stressors that cause workers to massacre their colleagues.

As is often the case, the nongovernmental standards makers are leading the way on the issue. In 2013, the Canadian Standards Association issued what has now become CSA standard [CAN/CSA-Z1003-13/BNQ 9700-803/2013 \(R2022\)](#) calling on employers to prevent violence and harassment but take active measures to foster a “psychologically safe” workplace.

Building the Business Case for Psychological Safety

While it’s widely acknowledged as a best practice, building a psychologically safe workplace is not a legal obligation. And that’s a disadvantage for HR and OHS directors advocating the idea. But even if the leaders of your organization are less receptive to a CSA standard than a legal obligation, you can pitch the idea of psychological safety in terms to which they will relate: profitability.

The starting point: work-related mental ailments like post-traumatic stress disorder and depression have become just as costly as physical injuries—and in many cases much more common. Workers’ compensation and other financial awards for work-related mental injury have grown as much as 700%(!) in recent years, the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) reports. Dr. Martin Shain, author of the MHCC report and one of Canada’s premiere experts in workplace mental health, estimates that prioritizing psychologically safe workplaces could save Canadian employers \$2.97 billion to \$11

billion **per year**. The source of those savings would be significant and sustainable gains in:

- Productivity
- Recruitment and retention
- Cost reductions due to lower disability and absentee rates
- Conflict reduction; and
- Operational success.

20 Best Practices for Achieving a Psychologically Safe Workplace

What would your company have to do to get its share of these savings and profitability enhancements? While there's no one-size-fits-all formula, Shain outlines 20 broad things companies can do as part of a broader [psychological safety program](#):

1. Issue a [policy statement](#) expressing the company's commitment to and prioritization of psychological health and safety.
2. Ensure that people in the company share a common understanding of what a psychologically safe workplace actually is.
3. Familiarize managers with the legal requirements related to workplace mental health and psychological safety.
4. Calculate how much stress-related illnesses, both physical and mental, are costing your company.
5. Measure [absenteeism](#) and [presenteeism](#) rates at your company.
6. Determine the percentage of absenteeism and presenteeism that's related to psychological health and safety issues.
7. Determine the percentage of your company's disability claims related in whole or part to mental health or workplace conflict issues.
8. Ensure your HR and OHS policies align with OHS, labour, tort, contract, and employment standards laws regarding psychological health and safety.
9. Use [performance indicators and evaluation methods to incentivize frontline managers to prioritize psychological safety](#).
10. Ensure that individuals in positions involving managing, supervising, or supporting workers are trained, skilled, and competent to make sound decisions.
11. Ensure that company leaders [recognize and respond to workplace conflict](#) promptly and effectively.
12. Train leaders and managers to understand the difference between mental health problems and performance issues.
13. Adopt a work-life balance policy.
14. Take measures to prevent physical, relational, or emotional harassment, bullying, or aggression.
15. Take measures to prevent disability discrimination by providing workers basic knowledge about mental health issues.
16. Implement crisis response policies and processes for issues like suicide, violence, threats of violence, or emotional breakdowns at work.
17. Establish a process that allows for open communications among managers, supervisors, and workers and empowers the company to address the needs of workers traumatized by personal or workplace issues.
18. Implement a return to work (RTW) policy that accounts for injured workers' emotional, psychological, and interpersonal challenges.
19. Implement a process for reasonably accommodating workers and job applicants with mental disabilities.
20. Be aware of and communicate the company, community, and other resources

available for workers struggling with mental health issues.