

The Psychologically Safe Workplace: Taking Your Organization beyond Workplace Violence and Harassment Prevention



\$2.97 BILLION TO \$11 BILLION PER YEAR

That's how much money furnishing psychologically safe workplaces could save Canadian employers.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

OHS programs have traditionally been geared to preventing physical injuries. But it has become increasingly clear that work-related mental ailments like post-traumatic stress disorder and depression are just as costly as physical injuries—and in many cases much more common. Workers' comp and other financial awards for work-related mental injury have grown as much as 700%(!!) in the past several years, the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) reports. The \$11 billion in potential savings that could be realized by preventing these mental ailments comes from Dr. Martin Shain, author of the MHCC report and one of Canada's premiere experts in workplace mental health.

HOW THE MONEY WOULD BE SAVED

According to Shain, employers who set a strategic goal of managing and improving workplace mental health would benefit from significant and sustainable gains in:

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

WHAT EMPLOYERS WOULD HAVE TO DO

These mental ailments that are sapping our workers and draining our finances have something in common: They're principally caused by social and psychological hazards. Of course, OHS laws are supposed to protect workers from occupational hazards. The problem is that the original OHS laws were all about machines,

chemicals, electricity and other traditional industrial hazards. What few recognized at the time was how workplace behaviours and psychological environments create hazards that are equally harmful. The 1999 OC Transpo massacre and other workplace violence incidents served as a wake-up call. For roughly the past decade, provincial governments have been in catch-up mode, changing their laws to require employers to have written policies to prevent workplace violence, bullying and harassment.

THE CHALLENGE

But once more, the laws are lagging behind our understanding of workplace social hazards. It is becoming increasingly clear that the basic workplace violence and harassment policy is too reactive and narrow in scope to deal effectively with these problems.

THE NEW APPROACH

In 2013, the Canadian Standards Association issued CSA standard CSA-Z1003-13, *Psychological health and safety in the workplace – Prevention, promotion, and guidance to staged implementation* calling on employers to adopt measures aimed not simply at stopping violence and harassment but creating a “psychologically safe” workplace. Although it’s not yet a law, psychological safety is widely acknowledged as a best practice.

THE 19 THINGS YOU MUST DO TO MAKE IT HAPPEN

While there’s no one-size-fits-all formula for psychological safety, Shain outlines 20 things organizations can do to achieve it.

1. Issue a policy statement expressing the organization’s commitment and stated priority to employee psychological health and safety. [[Click here](#) to access a psychological safety policy that you can adapt for your workplace.]
2. Ensure that people in your organization have a common understanding of what a psychologically safe workplace is.
3. Familiarize the management team with the legal and regulatory requirements related to workplace mental health and psychological safety.
4. Calculate how much stress-related illnesses—both physical and mental—are costing you organization.
5. Implementing a system to measure the rates of both absenteeism and presenteeism in your organization and determining the percentage of these that may be related to psychological health and safety issues.
6. Determining what percentage of your organization’s disability claims are related in whole or in part to mental health or workplace conflict issues.
7. Making sure your HR policies align with OHS, labour, tort, contract and employment standards laws regarding psychological health and safety.
8. Implementing a process to encourage frontline managers to provide a psychologically safe workplace via performance indicators and evaluation methods.
9. Making sure that individuals in positions involving managing, supervising or supporting employees are adequately trained, skilled and competent to make sound decisions.
10. Making sure that organization leaders and management recognize and respond to conflict in a timely and effective manner.
11. Making sure that organization leaders and management recognize are trained

to identify the difference between a mental health problem and a performance issue.

12. Adopting a work-life balance policy.
13. Taking measures to prevent physical, relational or emotional harassment, bullying or aggression.
14. Taking measures to prevent discrimination by providing all employees with a basic level of knowledge about mental health issues.
15. Implementing crisis response policies and processes for issues such as suicide, violence, threats of violence or emotional breakdowns at work.
16. Establishing a process that allows for open communications among managers, supervisors and employees that enables the organization address the needs of co-workers who are traumatized by personal or workplace issues.
17. Implementing a return to work (RTW) policy that takes into account the emotional, psychological and interpersonal challenges and allows union/employee representatives a role to play in the RTW process including the opportunity to provide input on the process.
18. Implementing policies and procedures for reasonably accommodating employees and job applicants with a mental health disability at work.
19. Being aware of the organization and/or community resources available for employees struggling with mental health issues.