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listen

Guide for Leaders

Supporting Workplace Mental Health and Wellbeing

Work can be incredibly rewarding but, as a leader you know, it can at times be stressful and challenging. What businesses are beginning to realise is that fostering a healthy work environment benefits business and everyone in the business. Leaders play a particularly important role in setting the tone and supporting the mental health and wellbeing of staff. You can do this by encouraging regular meaningful conversations and building an R U OK? Culture in your organisation.



“Businesses that invest in mental health are also more productive, innovative & likely to recruit & retain the best & brightest people.”

- Prof. Allan Fels, Former Chair,
National Mental Health Commission

What is a supportive workplace culture?

This is where people's wellbeing is supported and all staff are encouraged (and feel safe) to talk about any worries or concerns they may be experiencing, knowing they will not be judged but rather supported as they work through those challenges.

Not only does this make good business sense, it can also help you fulfil your legal occupational health and safety (OHS) obligations. Australia's states and territories have OHS laws that generally mean an employer must, so far as is reasonably practicable, provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risks to health. This includes providing work that is free from risks to people's mental health and wellbeing. There are many ways to build a supportive workplace culture. As a leader, you can actively manage circumstances that can cause stress for team members, such as long working hours or excessive job demands. You can also encourage your team to look out for one another, especially if we think someone might be struggling.

Mental Health and Mental Illness in Australia



Did you know?

- Promoting mental health can help individuals and communities thrive, it can also prevent mental ill-health. Unfortunately, mental ill-health is common in Australia. One in five (20%) Australians aged 16-85 will experience a mental illness in any one year. The most common mental illnesses are related to depression, anxiety, and substance use.¹
- Mental illnesses can often occur in combination. For example, a person with an anxiety disorder could also develop depression, or a person with depression might misuse alcohol or other drugs, to self-medicate. Of the 20% of Australians with a mental illness in any one year, 11.5% have one disorder and 8.5% have two or more disorders.¹
- Almost half (45%) of all Australians will experience a mental illness at some point in their lifetime.¹

¹[ABS Mental health](#)

So, what can you do?

You can model behaviour that sets the tone and supports a healthy work environment.

- Visibly demonstrate leadership commitment to the wellbeing of everybody at work
- Engage in regular and consistent communication around the importance of wellbeing
- Value psychological safety as well as physical safety
- Encourage trust and respectful communication
- Acknowledge good work practice
- Ask “are you OK?” and encourage others to have meaningful R U OK? conversations.

How can you do it?

- Communicate the R U OK? message year round, not just on Rail R U OK?Day via your local communication channels (intranet, newsletter, meetings)
- Sensitively share R U OK? stories that highlight instances where the organisation and individuals have been able to support each other to stay well or seek help
- Engage with your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) if you have one to understand how they provide support and what resources they have available for you and your staff
- Highlight the services available through the EAP and invite an EAP representative to talk to staff about what it offers and how to access the assistance.

- Embed the R U OK? Culture and messaging in recruitment, induction, training, and other guides, newsletters, presentations to staff and other resources
- Recognise and reward the efforts of your team for steps they take to build the R U OK? Culture
- Set a standing agenda item in team meetings to discuss wellbeing matters
- Get to know your staff so you can understand what's going on for them and recognise when situations in life or at work might be particularly challenging for them
- Share your own experiences or stories, if you feel comfortable doing so
- Check in with staff who have been on sick leave for more than a few days



What is an R U OK? Culture?

An R U OK? Culture is where wellbeing is promoted, and all staff are encouraged (and feel safe) to talk about the challenges or concerns they may be experiencing, knowing they will not be judged, but rather supported by management and colleagues as they work through those challenges.

What would an R U OK? Culture look like at your site/office?

- 1** I, my colleagues and our managers recognise that life and work can be challenging at times
- 2** There are support options available, and we know how to access them
- 3** There are positive relationships, a sense of camaraderie, and teamwork at our business
- 4** We acknowledge and manage the situations that cause us stress
- 5** We have regular and meaningful R U OK? conversations, any day of the year
- 6** We collect and share stories that demonstrate the power of asking 'are you OK?' to inspire and encourage all staff
- 7** We know how to support our colleagues if they respond "no, I'm not OK."

What will an R U OK? Culture do?

- Provide a mentally healthy environment for you and your colleagues
- Make a real difference to those going through a tough time by providing support without judgment
- Educate colleagues about the support networks available to them across the organisation, and in the community, to assist them when needed.

Leaders in mentally healthy workplaces also



- **Promote** a **positive** wellbeing culture
- **Prevent harm** to the mental health of their people
- **Support** and **respond** to people who experience mental health difficulties

Let's look at each of these in turn in relation to what you can do.

Promote a positive wellbeing culture

Most people like a bit of a challenge in their work. It's one of the things that brings us pride and makes us feel we are valuable contributors to our community. Being challenged by realistic and achievable goals helps develop positive mental health. A work environment that supports wellbeing helps staff meet those challenges and thrive. It also reinforces an R U OK? Culture.

Things you can do

- ✓ Model healthy behaviours such as attending to your own self-care, having breaks, and taking leave
- ✓ Focus on the strengths of your employees
- ✓ Give staff clarity about the roles they are expected to perform
- ✓ Ensure people engage in respectful behaviours and practices
- ✓ Be fair and inclusive
- ✓ Provide a space where employees can access their manager to talk about problems they may be having
- ✓ Offer flexible work arrangements such as working hours that support employees with family responsibilities, or a mix of office based and working from home options
- ✓ Encourage development of self-care skills and participation in wellbeing activities
- ✓ Create an atmosphere that encourages people to look out for each other



Prevent harm

At a practical level this means setting a tone or culture where people are engaged in their work yet feel free to talk to you about how they're going. It also involves informally checking in with staff on a regular basis. A quick word like: 'How'd that job go yesterday?' or 'Do you have everything you need for that job?'

Things you can do

- ✓ Support early help seeking ask 'are you OK?'
- ✓ Encourage participation in mental health and wellbeing training
- ✓ Endorse and support the efforts of R U OK? Workplace Champions
- ✓ Promote general health screening
- ✓ Display positive attitudes to staff who may be struggling
- ✓ Reduce stigma and normalise open discussions about mental health

Support and respond

The key things to know are how to recognise signs of possible mental ill-health at work, how to appropriately express your observations or concerns, how to offer support, and how to direct or refer people to further help when needed. It's important to remember that as a leader, you're doing what you can to support the person in their work role, not trying to treat their mental ill-health.

When it comes to supporting and responding, it is critical to demonstrate genuine and year round efforts, and to avoid being tokenistic, paying lip service, or just ticking boxes.

Things you can do

- ✓ Notice the signs and ask 'are you OK?' if you think someone might be struggling (see below)
- ✓ Have information about services and referral options available for staff who might need professional support
- ✓ Offer flexible work arrangements and reasonable adjustments as needed, for example, a gradual transition back to normal work hours
- ✓ Support effective return to work arrangements for those who have had time off



Signs someone might not be OK

Changes in how someone is functioning in the workplace might be a sign they are struggling with their mental health. Examples might include:

- changes in work habits, performance, and attendance
- changes in general behaviour
- changes in morale
- easily distracted
- less productive
- problems concentrating or making decisions
- increased incidence of mistakes or accidents
- difficulty managing stress (or stressors)
- difficulty interacting with others, or a lack of cooperation

If you notice signs such as these it might be time to ask 'are you OK?'. You can find information on how to have an R U OK? conversation at work at ruok.org.au/work



Remember - you're doing what you can to support the person in their work role, not trying to solve their mental problem yourself.

Where to start

It may seem like there is limited time and resource for this, but start small and remember you don't have to do everything at once. You also don't need to be a workplace mental health expert.

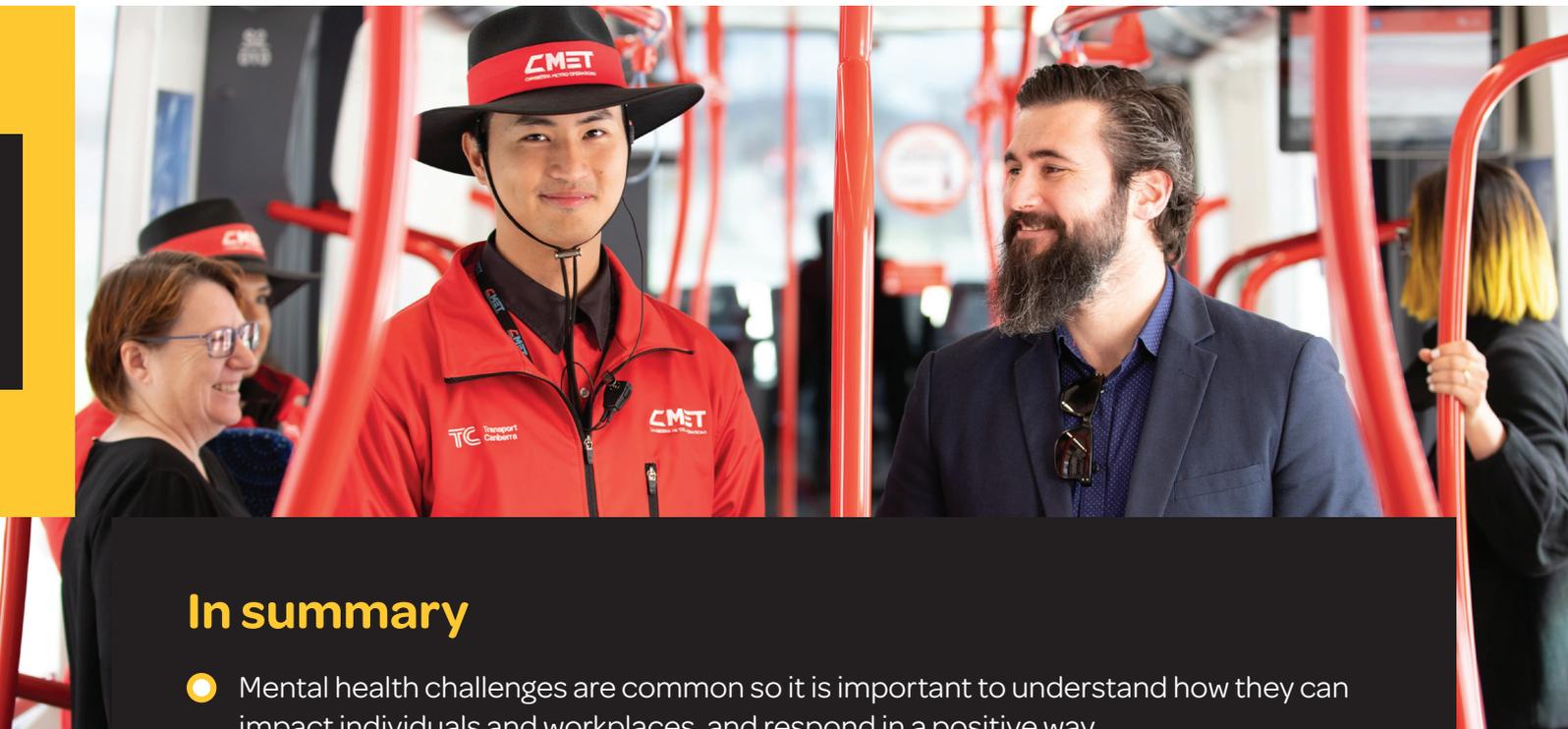
Begin with awareness raising to foster an environment where mental health can be discussed.

For example, you could stage an event for Rail R U OK? Day.

Demonstrate your commitment by **backing one or more of your staff to become an R U OK? Workplace Champion**. R U OK? provides a host of resources and support to help workplace champions build healthier organisations.

Think about your own mental health and wellbeing. Do a self-check of your work-life balance. If you are well and able you might like to share your personal story with your staff or utilise the range of workplace resources provided by R U OK? including guides, e-learning modules and videos.

A simple way to start could be **encouraging staff to do free web-based training to raise awareness**, such as through Heads Up. This could be followed by a discussion with staff to identify what further training or information they might like to have. You could also have genuine discussions with staff about what's going well at work and what they think could be improved and act on what you learn so staff know you value their input.



In summary

- Mental health challenges are common so it is important to understand how they can impact individuals and workplaces, and respond in a positive way
- Research shows a visible commitment and modelling behaviour by leaders is essential for building healthy workplaces
- Leaders play an important role to **promote** mental wellbeing, **protect** against risks, and **respond** to difficulties and mental ill-health

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conversation
on
track

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