



Psychologically healthy workplaces

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Introduction

There is a growing trend that the workplace needs to be a psychologically healthy place to work. The trend is not new. It started about 30 years ago, but has taken a long time for organisations to pick up on the benefits. Even now, most organisations see their obligation to their employees as little more than rudimentary safety and preventing harm.

Organisations that have picked up on the benefits place themselves in the best position to be successful and prosperous. Some public sector organisations appreciate that a psychologically healthy workplace results in the taxpayers' pound going much further and services provided being much more enthusiastic, helpful and effective. Turning the workplace into a psychologically healthy place to work cuts costs, increases productivity and opens the door to innovation and high performance¹.

There is, also, a wider benefit to society. Psychologically well organisations are less of a burden on the insurance and healthcare systems as they produce fewer numbers seeking healthcare assistance from both the public and private sectors.

Psychologically healthy organisations produce greater success for businesses, with the added societal advantage of contributing more to the wealth of the country, in a range of ways – more tax on profits per employee, and more innovation being two of them.

With such clear benefits, why don't more organisations actively seek to make their workplace psychologically healthy?

The answer probably lies in the current obsession to adopt only quick fix solutions to complex issues, combined with a traditional view of management as a being in charge of a workforce that is expected to do what it's told, and that any problems arising from that is the fault of the employee. Sadly, such an approach is stifling the talent, imagination and energy that's trapped inside the workforce.

¹ Workplace Well-being. How to Build Psychologically Healthy Workplaces. Eds. Arla Day, Kevin Kelloway and Joseph J. Hurrell Jr. (2014) John Wiley and Sons.

Sad, too, is the blindness of some organisations to the reality that they are absorbing huge costs of ill health. They are, unfortunately, incubating problems further down the line for Governments and future generations of taxpayers, with the lengthening of working life adding to the increase in chronic illness by contributing work related ill health. The problems over pensions are making some people work for longer years than they had hoped, at risk of poor health. Inevitably they will be calling on the public services for care and support as they grow older. There will be fewer taxpayers working the pay the bill adding further implications for the economy.

It's time to change; it's time to follow the trend of making the workplace a psychologically healthy place to work.

What is a psychologically healthy workplace?

Over the past decade or so the evidence has been accumulating that the right working environment, combined with the right job, right management and leadership, all within the right culture, have the effect of enabling individuals in the workplace to thrive. In psychological terms, the workplace, established along the lines that will be described, can produce positive affect in the individual. This means it can produce pleasurable and positive experiences that exhibit in individuals' joy, interest, alertness, energy, effective performance, liveliness, concentration, adventurousness, enthusiasm, dynamism and other positive sensations.

These personal sensations can be aligned to individual behaviour, such as engagement, smiling, welcoming, nurturing, and mutual support, which, in turn, can impact on the organisation in terms of improved productivity, low sickness absence, greater flexibility, and other attributes of corporate resilience and success.

This author has worked in this field from the perspective of establishing how to change organisations and people to achieve peak performance through improvements in the psychological wellbeing of the workforce. For him the key questions are around how to apply the psychology into practice, and how to get the messages across by providing feasible and valid actions to take.

There are key themes that have emerged from research over the past decade and more.

- a) The cultural environment can provoke positive emotions and affect
- b) The influence of leaders and managers, especially their approach, style, behaviour and attitudes, can provoke positive emotions and affect
- c) The individuals with positive emotions and affect produce positive attitudes towards work and the organisation, that, in turn, lead to peak performance in teams and in organisations as a whole

In essence, therefore, a psychologically healthy workplace is one that facilitates, provokes, and cajoles individuals to feel the most positive they have ever felt² about their work and the organisation that employs them.

² Positive feelings have several levels of intensity. Therefore, to describe the level of intensity that produces sustained peak performance, the author has made the sensation relative to feeling positive in other situations.

How to build a psychologically healthy workplace

It is often argued that one size doesn't fit all. This argument isn't helpful when seeking to assist people change their organisation for the better. Clearly, however, the detail and minutiae of each organisation is different because people are different, and so the final application of ideas for improvement have to be moulded to the personalities, purpose, structures and situation of the specific organisation.

However, the overall approach to building a psychologically healthy workplace can be the same for every organisation. This is achieved by developing and applying a framework that has universal utility.

In the framework that follows, emphasis is placed on the primary elements to put in place. Other elements, not necessarily described, flow from the primary elements. In other words, the primary elements provoke the secondary elements that lead to positive thinking and attitudes about work and the organisation. For example, little is discussed about hope. Hope is part of our psychological capital, and is strengthened by individual understanding of the vision for the organisation, and the place the individual has within that vision. In the framework, only vision is discussed, but, as will be seen, vision has several secondary elements that influence positive thinking and attitudes about the workplace.

We start with the person at work

Curiously, it is sometimes forgotten that the workforce is made up of people! The workplace is where people work. The workplace needs to be arranged in a manner that gets the best from the individual.

We start by identifying the elements that encourage the individual to feel psychologically well and healthy. We do this because everything in the workplace should have a connection to assisting in provoking the individual to feel psychologically well and healthy. Anything in the workplace that has a negative effect on the individual will counter-balance and erode the elements that are positive. It is, generally, the case that the negative is more positive than the positive and, therefore, has a greater impact than the positive. So, a single negative element, such as poor management behaviour, is likely to outweigh all the positives of a positive culture, for example.

Contributions to personal psychological health



The image shows a number of contributions to individual psychological health.

The workplace needs to be designed and managed to facilitate, provoke and cajole the individual to feel psychologically healthy.

Two core principles that provide the foundations of workplace behaviour and attitude

There are two principles that provide the foundation behaviours that underpin the behaviours of the workforce.

They are:

- Psychological Responsibility** – the responsibility that everyone shares which is to ensure individual psychological health and wellbeing as well as psychological health and wellbeing of everyone else. This means ensuring the individual is empowered to seek out the elements that makes the individual feel psychologically well at work, as well as assisting everyone else, the person interacts with, feel psychologically well and healthy.
- Sharing Responsibility for the future success of the organisation** – the responsibility that is shared amongst the whole workforce to do everything everyone can to ensure the future success of the organisation. This means thinking independently and providing unsolicited critiques of any part of the organisation the individual believes could be more successful, saying so, and helping to improve that part of the organisation.

These two principles play to almost all of the contributions to psychological health.

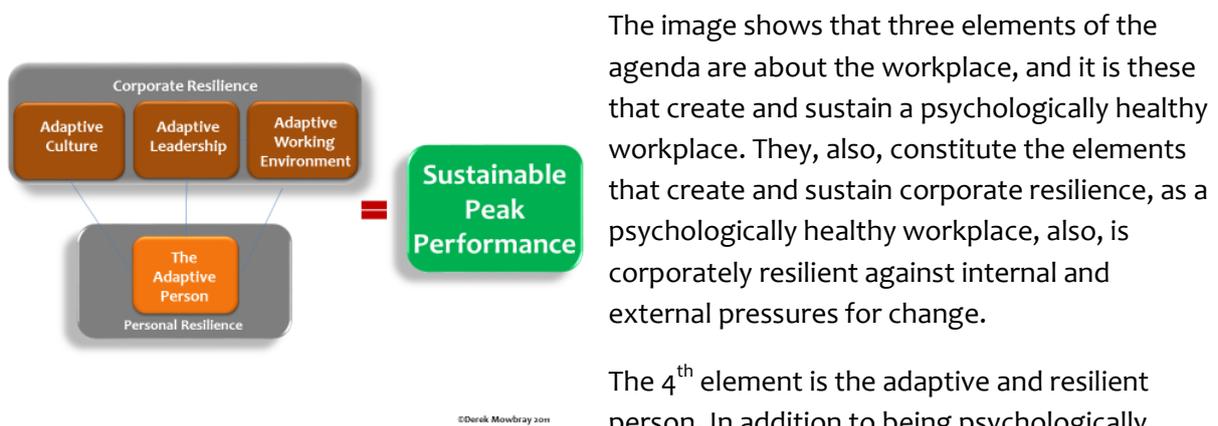
The framework for embedding the principles and building a psychologically healthy workplace

The image below provides the framework for building a psychologically healthy workplace.



The framework shows a systemic approach. Each of the four elements in the framework need to be implemented for the effect to take place.

The process for implementation is to follow The WellBeing and Performance Agenda³, as shown in the image below.



The image shows that three elements of the agenda are about the workplace, and it is these that create and sustain a psychologically healthy workplace. They, also, constitute the elements that create and sustain corporate resilience, as a psychologically healthy workplace, also, is corporately resilient against internal and external pressures for change.

The 4th element is the adaptive and resilient person. In addition to being psychologically

healthy, the individual is, also, resilient against events and behaviours that may threaten individual success and happiness.

³ See Derek Mowbray’s Guide to The WellBeing and Performance Agenda ISBN 978-0-9573835-3-1

Adaptive Leadership⁴⁵

Leadership and management have a profound impact on whether the workplace is a psychologically healthy workplace or not.

Leadership and management have a fundamental impact on Adaptive Culture, Adaptive Working Environment and Adaptive and Resilient Person. Depending on the approach adopted the impact is either positive, producing a psychologically healthy workplace, or the opposite.

Adaptive Leadership is a process. It is a process of ‘Sharing Responsibility for the future success of the organisation’. It is, therefore, the process for implementing the second foundation principle.

The behaviours of adaptive leaders include those that implement the first principle – Psychological Responsibility.

Adaptive Leadership emphasises the following:

A focus, by the workforce, on the organisation and NOT on management

Sharing responsibility – feeling accountable for the delivery of a successful organisation

Elephants in the room raised and dealt with. Whistleblowing is consigned to history.

Independent judgment is encouraged, expected and called for.

Leadership capacity is expanded as everyone is expected to take a lead over something.

Reflection and continuous learning is institutionalised.

Adaptive Leadership makes its contribution to personal psychological health by providing avenues for individuals to feel happy, hope, self esteem, optimism, attachment, gratification, empowerment, pleasure, meaning and success.

Adaptive Culture

Adaptive Leadership ensures the implementation of an Adaptive Culture.

An Adaptive Culture may have the features provided in the example below:

⁴ A framework for Adaptive Leadership is adapted from The Practice of Adaptive Leadership – Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World. Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow and Marty Linsky. Harvard Business Press 2009.

⁵ See Derek Mowbray’s Guide to Adaptive Leadership ISBN 978-0-9573835-2-4

Adaptive Cultural description

• **purpose** that is clear and unambiguous, expressed as a simple 'big idea', an idea which all the staff relate to closely, and are proud to discuss with friends and colleagues.

• **atmosphere** of sharing **responsibility** for the future success of the organisation, where all the staff are encouraged to think **independently**, are **attentive** to each other, are kindly and support each other, and act with **humanity**.

• **behaviour** that is **respectful** towards each other, value each other's views and opinions, work in teams which are places of mutual support, where anything is debated without a hint of humiliation, where the critique of individual and team work is welcomed, discussed and where lessons are learnt and implemented.

• **staff** who project a **confidence** towards clients and customers, who 'go the extra mile' by providing unsolicited ideas, thoughts, stimulus to each other, and where their interest in their customers offers something more than is expected, beyond courtesy, and beyond service, offering attentiveness and personal interest.

• **leaders and managers** who **challenge** their staff, who provide opportunities for personal development through new experiences, and who treat everyone with fairness and understanding.

• **an organisation** that is **driven** towards organisation and personal success - intellectually, financially, socially and emotionally.

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A culture influences how people behave and the ways in which they carry out their work. It influences how the workforce approaches their customers and clients, how they interact with each other, and how positive they feel towards their work and the organisation.

There are several discrete elements in building and sustaining an Adaptive Culture, and they are shown in the image below⁶.



One element is called **rules**. These are the rules by which the organisation is designed to work. Each of the rules is applied within the context of the two foundation principles – Psychological Responsibility and Sharing Responsibility for future success.

Recruitment – this emphasises the expectation that potential employees seek to join organisations that have a clear focus on psychological health and wellbeing; potential employees, also, seek to pursue a mission or a cause, and seek to share responsibility whilst being able to act independently as well.

Job – this emphasises the need for the job to be 'good work' with a clear value to the organisation and its purpose. The job amounts to describing where the work focus lies, but the employee is expected to share responsibility for future success, so also has a keen interest, as well as being a critique, of all other jobs in the organisation.

⁶ See Derek Mowbray's Guide to Corporate Resilience ISBN 978-0-9573835-1-7

Challenge – this is about ensuring the employee is provided with challenges within their capacity to meet, with and without additional training.

Pay – is about the pay that recognises the employee’s contribution to the success of the organisation.

Teams – working in effective teams becomes a microcosm of the organisation as a whole. Effective team working is a key vehicle for personal psychological health, and relies on team members sharing responsibility as well as having complementary roles – the whole team being greater than the sum of its parts.

Involvement – this is made manifest by the implementation of the second principle – sharing responsibility for future success. This principle requires the workforce to be involved, and particularly to be involved in decisions that may affect their own work and that of the team the employee belongs.

Communication – the essence of good leadership and management. This is about providing the opportunity for people to respond to information – the opposite of broadcasting, which is one way communication.

Career development – is about providing opportunities to explore different careers, both within the organisation and on secondment elsewhere. This expands individual horizons and plays to many of the elements that contribute to psychological health.

Encouragement – is part of Psychological Responsibility to encourage others. We respond positively to encouragement as it feeds our personal sense of self efficacy and self esteem.

Performance appraisal – this is a continuous process that is both informal and formal. It enables the person to know where he or she stands in terms of their performance. This is of particular significance when everyone is expected to share responsibility for future success; in effect performance appraisal is an integral aspect of Adaptive Culture and Adaptive Leadership.

Worklife balance – is more concerned with the response the organisation has to domestic crisis. If the organisation supports people with a crisis at home it enhances to level of engagement and commitment the person gives to their work and the organisation.

Training and development – this plays to individual need for new challenges, wider horizons, new skills and personal growth.

Citizenship – plays strongly to attachment. Individuals in the workforce like to feel kinship and citizenship; it is a kindly approach to sharing responsibility and helps to ensure the workplace is full of people who feel psychologically healthy.

Each rule makes a specific contribution to individual psychological health. Each rule forms an essential part of a psychologically healthy workplace, its culture and its climate. This helps to facilitate provoke and cajole individuals into feeling psychologically healthy and well.

Adaptive working environment

The working environment is normally associated with the physical environment. In the context of a psychologically healthy workplace the working environment has a focus on health and safety, as well as the physical environment, and processes of management.

Workforce Health and Safety is about ensuring the workplace provides a safe and healthy environment. This is about ensuring relevant regulations are followed, but, also, with respect to psychological health, that Psychological Responsibility is implemented, and that the Health and Safety Executive Management Standards for Stress are implemented.

In addition, individuals need encouragement to remain physically healthy throughout the working day as this helps with psychological health. Walking is the easiest, and often the most satisfying, way to keep physically alert.

Workplace environment is about ensuring that the workforce works with adequate natural light and ventilation. It goes beyond this, of course, to every aspect of the physical environment. Everything should be geared towards enabling the individual to concentrate and feel psychologically well.

The IT and technology have similar purposes, to help the individual perform tasks effectively, as this plays to several of the contributions to personal psychological health.

Workplace ergonomics is about ensuring human factors are taken into account in the design of office equipment and technological equipment. The ease with which equipment is used is another key element of feeling well.

Workplace management processes are about such processes are meetings and performance appraisals. Each management process needs to be based on the foundation principles of Psychological Responsibility and Sharing Responsibility. They, also, need to play to other contributions to individual psychological health, such as pleasure. Opportunities to socialise during the working day will play well and contribute to several elements of psychological health.

Adaptive and Resilient Person⁷

Resilience is the capacity for form positive attitudes towards anticipated events and behaviours that might pose a threat to personal success and happiness.

In a psychologically healthy workplace, the individual will be reinforcing their positive attitudes towards work and the organisation on a continuous basis. There will be little doubt about the motives of leaders and managers, and plenty of support in times of need. The climate will be one of mutual support with strong kinship and corporate citizenship. All these features will strengthen personal attitudes should events and behaviours be anticipated to occur that may challenge individual success and happiness.

⁷ See Derek Mowbray's Guide to Personal Resilience ISBN 978-0-9573835-0-0, and Derek Mowbray's Guide to The Manager's Role in Resilience (in press).

Having a strong and psychologically healthy workplace results in individuals in the workforce not requiring to call on their resilience, as the events and behaviours for which resilience is normally required will be reduced, if not eliminated.

However, it is unrealistic to expect every event and behaviour to be reduced and eliminated, so it is, always, a good idea to strengthen personal resilience.

This can be achieved in two ways – exposing the individual to new and challenging experiences so that the person can add to his or her portfolio the knowledge they can cope with these experiences, and will be able to do so again in the future.

The second is to top up personal resilience by refreshing oneself about who you are, and adding to self awareness some techniques and processes to help deal with difficult behaviours, for example, and situations of chaos.

Benefits from creating and sustaining a psychologically healthy workplace

There are a broad range of benefits that arise from a psychologically healthy workplace with psychologically well and healthy individuals.

Some of these have been introduced earlier, but the broader range of benefits is shown in the image below.



The overall impact of a psychologically healthy workplace is on performance. Performance improves in many directions – and the items in the image are measures of performance.

Conclusion

There is a general need for organisations to change the way they are arranged so that they can stop carrying the substantial burden of ill health, stop considerable under performance, and start improving the psychological health of the workforce leading to improved performance.

Apart from the benefit to individual organisations, there is a societal benefit that accrues from the lower level of ill health that results from improvements in organisational culture, leadership,

working environment and personal resilience. There will be less ill health burden arising from the extended length of working life that is needed to deal with the shortage of pension funds.

In addition, the improved productivity and performance of organisations will increase the amount of tax payable per employee from the increased profits that accrue. This has benefits to society as a whole.

However, the biggest and most significant benefit from psychologically healthy workplaces comes from the improvement in psychological health of individuals. This unleashes energy, innovation and motivation, and opens up personal interest in exploring wider horizons. This enriches the workplace, and provides the seedcorn for sustained growth and development.

For more information go to

www.wellbeing-and-performance-group.org.uk

www.mas.org.uk

Derek Mowbray's publications are available from our [website](#) or by emailing barbara.leigh@mas.org.uk

Derek Mowbray provides consultancy advice to all forms of organisation on Psychological Wellbeing and Performance, and the implementation of The WellBeing and Performance Agenda.