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Random acts of unkindness.

Rita Marcella

I was intrigued to read a statement by the World Health Organisation (WHO) recently that mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders in the same way that health is not just freedom from illness.

This somewhat reoriented my notion of mental health as a concept and my sense of mental health in the workplace as being very much about optimising the healthiness of the environments in which we ask staff to work.

Mental health is as a result a very positive statement of what employers should seek to encourage in their workforce by recognising factors which support mental health while seeking to minimise factors which tend to reduce it. This is I believe a helpful reorientation for managers to take in managing people.

In effect, employers have three duties each of which requires a different mindset: 1) to support staff with mental health issues and prevent any discrimination against them; 2) to ensure that the work environment does not create an environment in which mental health is likely to be impaired; and 3) to seek ways of promoting and encouraging optimal mental health.

In terms of supporting staff with mental illness, this is not an insignificant challenge in that around 70 million working days a year are lost as a result of stress, depression and other mental health issues, at a cost of £70 to £100 billion to the UK economy, according to a report by Dame Sally Davies. The UK's Chief Medical Officer called for employers to find ways for staff to stay engaged in work productively while encountering mental health problems. Staff tend to remain actively engaged in workplaces where employers are prepared to be more flexible around working hours and maintain contact with employees on sick leave.

There are numerous factors which can impinge negatively on mental health in the workforce, and these are often also characteristics of what is sometimes termed a "toxic workplace". These include lack of direction, lack of respect for others, uncertainty and lack of trust. In difficult times and in situations of heightened levels of uncertainty, tensions and issues are exacerbated and it is particularly important that employers and managers be attuned to the atmosphere amongst workforce, the level of morale amongst staff and the extent to which individuals may feel exposed and uncomfortable in their working environment.

In our present industry context in the north-east with so many affected by job losses amongst family and friends and remaining uncertainty about job losses to come, it is crucial that employers be vigilant and alert to staff worries and seek to minimise uncertainty wherever possible. One of my colleagues Anne Stevenson wrote recently of the importance of the psychological contract that employers implicitly enact with employees which is not about the company's formal policy and procedures but is rather the unwritten rules and expectations that everyone knows or thinks apply. This unwritten psychological contract can be a very powerful force at difficult times, when trust can also suffer.

So what constitutes a toxic work environment? It's a mix of things including: the existence of opposing cliques and an absence of collegiality; bullying at any level but particularly amongst those in authority; interruptions and invasiveness; a sense of unfairness or lack of authenticity and honesty; poor or uneven communications throughout the organisation; and high levels of illness in any form.

Recently at Robert Gordon University during Mental Health Awareness Week, staff were encouraged to engage in behaviours that are likely to promote good mental health amongst the community through what was termed "random acts of kindness". While this is an entirely laudable effort, it seems to me a little sad that people need to be encouraged to undertake such acts of kindness. And while I applaud the initiative's focus on the positive, one of the most significant things that an employer can do in promoting mental health is to ensure by example that there are fewer, if indeed any, random acts of unkindness.

In a workplace where random acts of unkindness are the norm, the culture will effectively be toxic and result in high levels of illness including mental illness. And it is the case that the links between sound management principles and organisational success are well proven.

It would be worth all of us asking ourselves what was my last random act of kindness but also and perhaps, more tellingly, what was my last random act of unkindness. For there are times where organisational imperatives and good ideas get in the way of kindness or have unintended consequences that may hurt those people we employ. This is not, in my personal view, good practice; it will not work in the best interests of the employers ultimately and it will be a telling sign of a toxic workplace where such acts are the accepted norm.

Interestingly the American Psychological Association has found evidence to show that companies that have mentoring programmes for managers at all levels and executive coaching for senior managers perform well in terms of low levels of absence. They also identified five areas of intervention that promoted a psychologically healthy workplace:

- Employee involvement
- Work-life balance
- Employee growth & development
- Health & safety
- Employee recognition

While thinking about what might be done to enhance the workplace at the Aberdeen Business School, yet another colleague Professor Heather Fulford suggested music in our social spaces and from that conversation a plan is emerging to place a piano in our atrium. There are many ways in which our environments can be enhanced by small acts at little or no cost – by kindness, by music and by respect.