Addressing mental health needs to manage workplace conflict.

Communities and organisations are amid a tense and confrontational phase.
A recent study by TELUS Health (Formerly LifeWorks) found that one in four workers experienced conflict with colleagues or customers in the past 12 months.

The "Heroes" phenomenon and the "We are all in this together" mentality that were predominant at the beginning of the pandemic dissipated as we went through cycles of lockdowns and restrictions. As the pandemic continues into its third year, combined with a rise in inflation, a softening of the economy, and the impact of the war in Ukraine, Australians have evolved from hyper-alert and compassionate to exhausted and apathetic. It is no surprise that, under such circumstances, we are seeing increased tension in the workplace. In what normally may have qualified as minor inconveniences, escalation of issues is becoming routine in personal interactions. People act out, teams become fractured, and leadership becomes reactive. Although conflict in the workplace is inevitable, when properly managed, it can spark meaningful discussions and fuel creativity and innovation. However, when conflict escalates or festers, it has a detrimental impact on work productivity, engagement, relationships, and ultimately, mental health. To alleviate this tension, we need to focus on the underlying causes.

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Increased sensitivity to stress.

When polling the Australian population in April 2022, TELUS Health found that 46% of workers were feeling more sensitive to stress and nearly half (46%) noticed their colleagues were more sensitive to stress compared to before the pandemic. Fundamentally, humans are wired to respond to stress and either ready for combat or flee - this is the fight-or-flight response. This complex mechanism, which activates regions of the brain that control fear, motivation, memory, and mood, is usually self-limiting, meaning that once the threat is no longer present, the body and mind return to normal. However, when stressors persist, the stress response remains activated and long-term exposure to stress-release hormones leads to disruption of many of the body's processes. Chronic stress induces macroscopic changes in specific brain areas. When subjected to prolonged stress, our stress response system becomes hypersensitive, impairing our ability to adapt. In daily life, this results in increased conflict because every little thing is processed by a cognitive system that is primed to respond to a threat.

Increased burnout

Burnout is a reaction to excessive and prolonged stress. Although not a clinical diagnosis, burnout is characterised by three main symptoms: exhaustion, distancing from activities or cynicism, and diminished performance. Recent findings from the Mental Health Index by TELUS Health found that nearly half of Australians (45%) end their workday feeling mentally and/or physically exhausted and more than one-quarter (28%) are finding it more difficult to concentrate on their work. The self-reported mental health of these groups is well below the national average. When feeling burnt out, handling negative emotions is a challenge. As impulse control diminishes, empathy plummets, while anger, irritability, and cynicism rise. Tasks once enjoyable are no longer so and bitterness abounds. As those feeling the effects of burnout respond in adverse ways, conflict in personal, social, and workplace relationships is often inevitable.

71%

are comfortable with less social interaction than before the pandemic.

46%
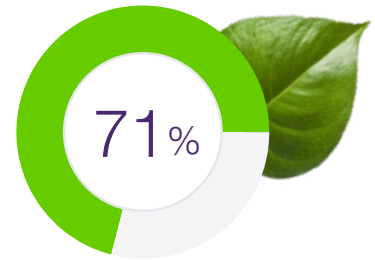
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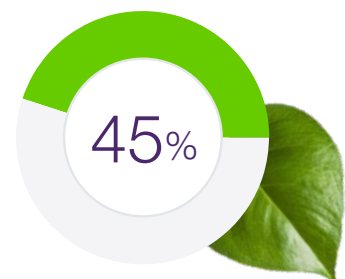
Long-term impact of social isolation.

Humans are social beings by nature. Relationships and social interactions are necessary for healthy development and community strength. Yet, throughout much of the last two years, restrictions and physical isolation were necessary to limit spreading the COVID-19 virus. There are precedents for these circumstances. During the 2003 outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), citywide quarantines were imposed in China and Canada. Similar measures were taken for entire villages in west African countries during the 2014 Ebola outbreak. Accordingly, there is a robust body of research on the psychological impact of isolation which shows that in periods shorter than 10 days, significant negative psychological consequences that have long lasting effects take hold. Post-traumatic stress, confusion, and anger can present for up to three years. Following periods of restriction, people may continue to engage in avoidance behaviours, reinforcing the impact of social deprivation and increasing the potential for lingering anger and irritability. TELUS Health research found that 71% of employed Australians are comfortable with less social interaction than before the pandemic. A prolonged absence of socialisation over the last two years has culminated in a population retreating into themselves, being less compromising in their interactions, and more irritable when challenged. The sum of which triggers unsuitable responses and the escalation of conflict. As Australians make their way back to the workplace, the adverse sentiment borne out of pandemic restrictions is setting the stage for increased conflict.

Conflict is natural and bound to occur when people with different background and diverse perspectives work alongside one another. However, the current socio-economic circumstances have exacerbated multiple risk factors, manifesting into increased conflict. It is by addressing the risk factors, the root causes of conflict, and not necessarily conflict itself, that organisations will promote psychologically safe workplaces where conflict is healthily dealt with.

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What can leaders and organizations do to address conflict?

Strengthen peer relationships.

Create intentional opportunities for employees and leaders to come together in person. These opportunities are critical to help break the cycle of avoidance behaviour. A strong social network to call upon and people to talk to when facing difficulties is vital in supporting resilience. Social interactions at work improve wellbeing, self-reported positive feelings, engagement, and productivity.

Provide training for managers.

Rightful differences of opinion should not be suppressed and are fuel for innovation and creativity. Cultivating a culture of tolerance and respect wherein people contribute without fear of judgement or repudiation signals a balanced and psychologically healthy workplace. Learning to recognise early signs of burnout and signs of those struggling with their mental health is critical to providing timely support before issues worsen or impact the workplace. Workplace Learning provides leadership programmes that help managers and people leaders develop their skills and abilities with a focus on mental health and wellbeing. These include how to look for and spot staff struggling with issues, techniques to communicate with staff about these issues, and awareness of what support is available (to them and their staff).

Improve mental health literacy and resiliency.

Mental health literacy is not only a matter of knowledge. It reduces stigma and opens the door for people to get the help they need. Building healthy coping skills is necessary to face stress and uncertainty. TELUS Health digital platform provides extensive content, across a range of media, as well as on-line CBT modules, to provide personalised support. In addition, TELUS Health Employee Assistance Programme provides immediate access to specialised professionals in counselling, social work, and psychology.

References

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