**PEOPLE RESOURCES**

# Identifying Workplace Issues

Source:  Workplace Strategies for Mental Health

**Summary**:  Approaching workplace issues in terms of intended outcomes and solutions rather than as problems can improve both psychological safety and organizational success. Prepare for the conversation by objectively reviewing the situation.

## Questions to ask before engaging the employee

The following list of questions are for you to ask yourself prior to engaging the employee:

### CONSIDER YOUR OWN NEEDS

- Do I have the time to do this properly or I am pressuring myself to rush through this?
- Am I responding to hearsay or speaking about known facts?
- Am I in the right frame of mind to do this or should I be rescheduling for another day?
- Am I considering my role in the situation or believing that I have no need to improve?

### APPROACH THE ISSUES WITH A FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS

- Am I looking for solutions or just rehashing the problem?
- Will this approach bring about the right behaviours or focus on the wrong behaviours?
- Will this approach bring about long-term improvement or only short-term results?

### EXPLORE POSSIBLE EFFECTS ON THE EMPLOYEE AND CO-WORKERS

- Am I seeing the bigger picture or just this particular situation?
- Will the potential solution provide energy for the employee or drain them?
- Can I preserve the dignity of those involved or will someone feel shamed or blamed?
- Does this approach encourage the employee to take control and responsibility for their well-being and success or am I retaining all control?
- Have I adequately addressed the fears and concerns of others or will they feel I am minimizing them?

### HELP THE EMPLOYEE ACHIEVE SUCCESS AT WORK

- Can the employee and I develop a shared plan for success or will we hold separate ideas of what success will look like?
- Am I helping my employee be successful on the job or am I focused only on either personality issues or task concerns?
- Will I monitor and follow up or do I think one conversation will be the end of it?

**CONSIDER THE IMPACT OF YOUR MANAGEMENT STYLE**

- How do I usually give instructions? Do I know if my approach works for the employee?
- How do I usually give feedback? Do I know how my style impacts the employee?

*Adapted with permission from Mental Health Works.*

## Mental health and workplace stressors

As with all illnesses, an employee's choice of treatment for mental health concerns is outside of the authority or responsibility of the workplace. Mental health issues, including stress, can distort perceptions and heighten emotional reactions. Your focus needs to stay on managing workplace stressors, clarifying expectations and helping the employee be successful at their job. This distinction is the foundation of the workplace plan.

**Help the employee identify workplace stressors** – Support the employee to develop coping strategies. For example, you may ask:

- what part of the workday they find most stressful
- what tasks or parts of tasks they find most stressful
- how they feel about receiving negative feedback
- if they experience stress with the way they are given instructions and direction
- if they experience the expectations of the job as stressful, or as positive motivation
- if they experience stress about work relationships

**Collaborate on solutions** – Don't offer solutions until you've given the employee a chance to come up with their own. Each employee will require solutions unique to their own situation. If the employee's solution is not practical, have a conversation to reach a compromise.

**Support the employee's request** for resources to help manage mental health concerns or workplace stressors. See the many free and credible Health and Wellness Resources under Employee Resources at www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com.

**CLARIFY EXPECTATIONS**

A common issue related to those experiencing mental health concerns is lack of clarity or shared understanding about work tasks.

**Be clear about expectations** – This includes work tasks, deadlines, and acceptable levels of quality. Expectations about appropriate workplace behaviours and interactions should also be included where relevant. Be sure expectations apply equally to all employees to avoid the appearance of discrimination.

**Clearly articulate expectations** – These should be specific and measurable to reduce confusion and misunderstanding, and provide a guideline for easier evaluation of progress.

- Have the employee help describe expectations in words they find clear.
- The plan should include how these expectations will be measured.
- Agree on the process that will be followed if the expectations are not met.

The free resource Supporting Employee Success provides a step-by-step process to collaborate with employees. It explores how their psychological, emotional, cognitive and physical issues may impact job expectations and considers strategies that support employee success.

**REPHRASE IDENTIFIED ISSUES AS INTENDED OUTCOMES**

Knowing what to say can be a challenge when you are concerned about an employee's emotional reaction. It can be helpful to restate issues or problems as intended outcomes or solutions. Rather than triggering defensiveness, the conversation can be a collaboration focused on success.

For example:

- "I want team meetings to be positive and effective."
- "I need deadlines to be met or obstacles to meeting deadlines identified earlier in the process so we can find solutions."
- "Reports should ideally have no errors in fact and no spelling, grammatical or formatting errors."

In each of the above situations ask: "What needs to happen to support this?" Use the response to begin discussing possible solutions.

**Support the employee in the conversation** by asking questions such as:

- "What do you find most challenging/stressful in your work?"
- "What part of your job energizes you?"
- "Who do you depend on to complete your tasks?"
- "Is there a skill set or training that could help you do your work more effectively?"

**Act on concerns** – Commit to undertake action to address concerns:

- Prioritize tasks if the employee is overwhelmed.
- Reduce pressure or stressors where possible.
- Focus the employee on tasks that energize them, where practical.

*Adapted with permission from source: Baynton, M. (2011) Resolving Workplace Issues. Waterdown, Ontario: Self-Published.*

Developing a Workplace Plan details other steps to support the employee's success while addressing issues.

The free video series Managing Mental Health Matters, provides video-based training to help support an employee through issues related to return to work, accommodation, conflict or performance.

The free video module Managing Emotions provides evidence-based strategies that can help positively impact workplace stress levels.

**Create your own mental health resource list**

Prepare a customized list of mental health resources that includes organizational and community resources to help employees that are experiencing a mental health issue or crisis. Share the form with all employees and keep it up to date and readily accessible for when help is needed.

You can use our fillable Mental Health Resource List or add to an existing list or database of resources within your organization. Regularly contact all resources named to make sure their information is current.

**ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES**

Include details of your company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP), benefits or other resources as well as people in the organization (occupational health, wellness professionals, human resources, diversity officers, etc.) who are available to help an employee who may be experiencing mental health issues at work.

**COMMUNITY RESOURCES**

**Mental health services** – Many provinces now provide links to mental health services [see Additional Resources below]. It is recommended that you contact service providers directly to make sure they are a good fit for your list and, when appropriate ask them to recommend other resources.

**Addiction services** – Services to help people with substance use disorders are usually offered separately from services for people who have mental health diagnoses. Many provinces have a central registry of addiction services. As you are building your list, contact service providers directly to make sure they are a good fit for your list, and when appropriate ask them to recommend other resources.

**Community support services** – Look for local organizations that offer support services such as group therapy, peer support, education about mental illnesses, and support for family members.

**Professional support** – Sometimes it can be difficult for people seeking treatment to locate the right professional support. Prepare a list of people or organizations in your area that specialize in treatment services related to mental illnesses such as depression, eating disorders, bipolar disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorder and addictions. These are the common mental health issues in the workplace and not all psychologists, social workers or doctors specialize in these areas.

**Crisis response** – When a crisis involves someone who is experiencing mental health issues, you may wish to call a mental health crisis response team instead of law enforcement. Find out in advance who offers this service in your community, the hours they are available, the area that they serve, and when it is appropriate to call them. If you do not know who to call to find out about crisis response teams in your area, start with the emergency department of the local hospital. They often know who provides these services.

*If there is an immediate danger, call 911 or the emergency response number in your area.*

These and other resources to assist with a broad spectrum of mental health concerns can also be found in Depression, Anxiety and Other Conditions.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

**Mental Health Services by Province**

British Columbia

Alberta

Saskatchewan

Manitoba

Ontario

New Brunswick

Prince Edward Island

Nova Scotia

Newfoundland and Labrador

Links to services across Canada

*These are just a sampling of what is available in some provinces and is not an all-inclusive list.*