

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE

EPISODE #89

HOW TO EMBED PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN AUSTRALIA'S
WORKPLACES

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DAVID PEMBROKE:

Today's episode of work with purpose contains mentions of suicide, domestic assault, and child abuse. If you feel distressed during the episode, there is support available to you. Please call Lifeline's 24/7 support line on 13 11 14 if you need someone to talk to.

Hello everyone and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian Public Sector and how it serves the Australian community. My name is David Pembroke, thanks for joining me. As we begin today, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region.

And I'd also like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands from where anybody listening to this podcast is joining us from. So, it goes without saying that we all want to work for organisations where we are valued, supported, and free to voice our ideas and our opinions. Not only is there the obvious benefit to the individual, but also as numerous studies have found, it helps organisations to thrive and succeed if employees feel psychologically safe.

New work, health and safety regulations introduced on the 1st of April of this year to govern Australian workplaces have been designed to achieve these very aims. These regulations to build mentally healthy workforces prescribe how duty holders must engage and consult with workers to identify and manage hazards and risks to workers' psychological health and safety. Psychological safety is on the agenda of the Federal Government's Secretary's Boards. All APS Department Heads met recently to revisit psychological safety as a tool to strengthen pro integrity culture in light of the findings of the recent Robodebt Royal Commission.

So, today on Work with Purpose, we're joined by two experts on the topic to take a closer look at how we manage psychosocial risks in the workplace and how regulation in this space is changing to better support employees. Sarah Hawke has over a decade's experience in Social Policy Reform and is currently leading Suicide

Prevention and Priority Population's Mental Health Reform in the Department of Health and Aged Care. She's held numerous executive leadership roles in social services and disability and has a passion for connecting people with community. She joins me now. Sarah, welcome to Work with Purpose.

SARAH HAWKE:

Thanks, David. It's great to be with you today.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

And Greg Vines is the Chief Executive Officer of Comcare, the Commonwealth Work Health and Safety Regulator and Workers' Compensation Authority. He is responsible for the day-to-day operations of Comcare, including its governance responsibilities and reporting requirements as a Corporate Commonwealth Entity. Prior to taking on this current role, he was the Deputy Director General of the International Labour Organisation from 2012 to 2022 and has held numerous leadership roles in various trade union organisations. Greg, welcome to Work with Purpose.

GREG VINES:

Thanks very much, David. It's great to be with you.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So, Sarah, listen, if I might start with you first, can you describe what you believe is a psychologically safe workplace?

SARAH HAWKE:

Yeah, thanks, David. To me there's a real feeling when you walk into a workplace that is psychologically safe and it is a place where people feel connected and engaged, and I'd say empowered to contribute at all levels. That's really about having a shared understanding of the organisation's purpose and how their role and team contributes, and that there is a general culture of actively encouraging and supporting all staff to contribute ideas and raise concerns.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

And Greg, for you, what do you believe is a psychologically safe workplace?

GREG VINES:

Very, very similar to Sarah, David. I think there's a few factors to it. One of them is very much around trust in the workplace. One where communication flows freely, where everyone can voice their ideas regardless of whether they're bold or challenging. And they can do

that without any fear of retaliation or ridicule. I think a second important aspect is around diversity and inclusion, where diversity isn't just tolerated, but it's actually celebrated. That taking into account the varied backgrounds and perspectives of people are really the lifeblood of a healthy work environment.

And recognising that every voice matters, that there shouldn't be any fear of exclusion or bias, just the freedom to be authentic and to contribute in your own unique way. I think obviously support for employee wellbeing is critical. It should be a foundation, not an afterthought. And a psychologically safe workplace is one where employers prioritise and proactively support their employees' wellbeing. And I think also, of course, fair, and ethical treatment is critical. It's got to be the norm. Unethical behaviours, things like bullying, harassment, discrimination must be swiftly tackled, and grievances must be taken seriously.

It's really about fostering a culture of respect where everyone is treated with dignity and fairness. And I think civility is also an important part of that workplace, that safe workplace, where the behaviours of common courtesy and decency that ensure a respectful and courtesy work environment and civility in the workplace can make a big difference to enhancing workplace culture. So, I think psychological safe workplaces really lie in these pillars that creates an environment that respects, values and supports all workers, ultimately driving the collective success.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So, Sarah, that creates a fairly clear picture of what you would imagine most workplaces would be striving for, but why is it that this doesn't happen in all cases? What works against psychological safety in workplaces?

SARAH HAWKE:

So, in my experience in having actually had the benefit in a former life of heading up the initial liability area of Comcare, what are really common areas of breakdown in terms of psychological safety in the workplace is about really poor communication, failure to deal with emerging workplace conflict effectively, lack of role clarity and lack of understanding of the organisational purpose. But most often it is

really simple things around poor communication, consultation and often poorly managed change. Change is something that we're always having to support and manage in the Public Service environment, and it can go wrong at so many stages.

And that is often a key driver of psychological unsafety. And also, I think being really considered about how we do communicate and engage with people to make them feel heard and empowered is an extra challenge that we have in a diverse environment where we're working across a number of virtual and often with interstate staff. So, for me, it comes down to a lot of the things that Greg mentioned and in being authentic and genuinely taking the time to listen to and make sure people understand what the areas of focus are and feel supported in being able to do their work.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

And what about for you, Greg? What do you see as those barriers that are working against productive, psychologically safe workplaces?

GREG VINES:

Look, I think to a large extent it comes down to respect in the workplace. I've often said, and most of my work has been around the dignity of work, and I'd also like to extend that out to dignity at work. That if you want a safe environment, the diversity of people must be respected, the opportunities for people must be provided. As I indicated before, things like bullying and harassment just simply cannot be tolerated in a workplace. And so, it's really, I think trying to bring out the opportunities for people.

We know that psychologically safe and healthy workplaces are far more productive than the alternative. And I think that a large part of it is the understanding from the employer's point of view, the preparedness for workers to really stand up for that fairness in the workplace. And this really is a large part of the work that Comcare does, is trying to better equip and educate people to identify these hazards, these risks and these events, but really to act swiftly to ensure that health and safety comes above all else in the workplace.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So, Greg, why was it necessary to introduce these regulations from the 1st of April, and how do you see them working in practice?

GREG VINES:

Well, it's a really interesting point because we've had the Commonwealth Workplace Health and Safety Act for over a decade now, and it's always dealt with psychological psychosocial hazards and injury in exactly the same way as physical injury. However, I think it's been recognised over the last few years and indeed a review that was undertaken in 2018 identified that there was just simply a lack of understanding, a lack of appreciation of the, in some cases, I think genuineness, the complexity, the causes and the relationship to work in some cases.

And so, it was decided to amend the regulations so that it became more explicit, that it really was aimed to strengthen and clarify how employers must manage the risks for psychosocial health. As you say, those amendments came into place on the 1st of April this year, and we're now working across jurisdictions to develop a code of practice that will assist employers and indeed workers identify and eliminate the risks, but really also to reinforce that obligation on employers to eliminate though any psychosocial hazards at work, or at least to minimise them to the greatest extent possible. So, it's really the regulations reinforce, or I suppose highlight, because it needed highlighting, but reinforce the fact that psychosocial injuries and hazards must be dealt with in exactly the same way, with exactly the same amount of commitment, if not even more than what physical risks in the workplace must be dealt with.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So, in terms then of Comcare's priorities in supporting the development of more awareness and better practice around psychosocial workplaces or safety in the workplace, you mentioned there about the code of practice, you've mentioned about education, but how else are you supporting employers to be more aware and more able to deliver these types of working environments?

GREG VINES:

Well, we've got a wide range of toolkits, of educational programs, of outreach activities that we engage in. These are all designed to, as

I say, bring people up to a better level of understanding, but also in our regulator role, looking at alternative ways, more innovative ways of really trying to address some of these in the workplace. So, for example, we've recently introduced a proactive inspection program. We've set up a dedicated team within our inspectorate to deal purely with psychosocial health risks. They're now trialling some programs, and I think we've got three different employers that we are working with.

And that program is to really look at how we can proactively avoid these sorts of injuries in the workplace. It's to better understand the hazards and risks, and it's also of course, being a regulator, to improve compliance with the appropriate practices. But what we are trying to do in this approach is to foster that compliance in a much more collaborative cooperative way. Of course, we've got our regulator stick when it comes to a situation that we must regulate, but we find it's far more effective, particularly in the case of psychosocial injury, that we can work effectively, cooperatively with the employer, with the workers in that workplace to really try and change work practices.

We've also, just in the federal budget this year, the government allocated two million dollars to better train Health and Safety Representatives. So, these are the elected Worker Representatives around mental health issues in the workplace, the psychosocial hazards, so that they can play a more effective part in their workplaces as well. And another really important piece of work we've just released, and all of this information is of course available on the Comcare website, where we've put together a fantastic program on good work design because we're often finding that a lot of the psychological hazards are related to poor work design, poor workload allocation, that lack of respect in the workplace.

And so, this toolkit that we've put together is really about supporting teams to be engaged, to be productive. We know that organisations will attract and retain staff if they've got good proactive practices in the workplace that avoid these sorts of risks and hazards. And certainly, we know that good work design, effective distribution of

work, respect in the workplace, results in better policy and service delivery. So, there's a number of these measures that we are actively working across our jurisdiction, and in several cases working across the other Australian jurisdictions as well, in really trying to have not just great academic papers and theoretical approaches, but really on the ground support through training, through sitting down and talking, through really taking a collaborative and cooperative approach to addressing this challenge.

And it is a massive challenge. It's now more than a third of the claims that Comcare receives on worker's comp are psychosocial related, workplace bullying is a major proportion of those. So, it's not just something to talk about, it's something we've really got to be acting on.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So, Sarah, in your experience, what are some of the challenges that leaders face when they try to implement these psychosocial principles in their workplaces?

SARAH HAWKE:

Yeah, there's really drawing on some of the areas that Greg's just highlighted. I can probably think about three areas of challenges that I've experienced in different roles in the Public Service across service delivery policy, and a range of areas. And one of them is unique to the area that I work in now, and that's in mental health and suicide prevention. So, it's around managing the inherent risk of the nature of some of the work that we do in the Public Service. So, we so often in our service of the public work with members of the public who are experiencing really significant distress. For example, providing support and help in responding to people impacted by natural disasters, people who are experiencing significant financial hardship, often family breakdown, domestic violence.

We also administer the scheme responsible for supporting financial support for survivors of childhood abuse. And in my current role, we work with people who are experiencing or caring for people who are experiencing significant mental or suicidal distress, and they're

looking for help from government. So, it's really important that we work with staff to ensure that they've got the right skills and training, that we understand what the risks are to be able to help put in place processes to manage that risk. One of the things that we have done recently is to establish a distress management and escalation protocol and providing clarity to staff about what they are and aren't responsible for in relation to responding to distressing stories and call for help and to make sure supervisors and managers are equipped to be able to look out for and support staff and properly manage the allocation of work.

But as we know, despite all the good training and processes we have in place, sometimes people are impacted. And that's why really good supervision, trust and communication is so important to be able to quickly and appropriately respond to a situation where an employee has been exposed to and affected by something distressing in the course of work. And if we take that action to notice and respond early, then we can make a real difference to the impact of that exposure. Another area that Greg touched on that's a constant challenge, I think, in managing psychological safety principles in the workplace is workload allocation and management.

Again, despite all the efforts in building capacity and capability and good systems and processes, when people are under pressure, some of these break down and create individual and workplace stress. So, it's really important to create the time and space to be able to empower staff to find new ways of working and basic approaches in reprioritising and deprioritising work. But sometimes, and I think we're experiencing that at the moment, where it's difficult to recruit and retain skilled staff and/or we're facing budgetary constraints, that we really do have to work with staff to find creative solutions to manage workload stress.

Probably one of the final ones that I'd like to reflect on is around, again, change management. In addition to the constant change, we often need to manage as public servants and leaders, and there's some really good training and resources to do that carefully and take the time to do that in a planned way. In some roles, often in

service delivery, the systems and processes that have been established over a long time no longer serve us and serve the public. And that change management takes a lot of time and needs to be done carefully. But it can also be really difficult when you're relying on areas outside of our control like ICT infrastructure and budgetary constraints.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So, there are quite a number of challenges really to try to embed this into best practice and to normalise it as a way of people, as you say, managing workloads, fairly distributing work, understanding some of those really challenging contexts. But on top of that, we now have work from home where more and more people are working remotely from their central office. Greg, to you, how are you seeing working from home impacting on psychologically safe workplaces?

GREG VINES:

Yeah, well, it can be a bit of a double-edged sword, David, and you mentioned previously I was with the ILO, and we certainly did quite a bit of work on this looking globally in the aftermath of the main impact of COVID where work from home went from a rarity to the absolute norm. And certainly, and what we're seeing now, is that there is no question for many, many people working from home is a great boost for their mental health. They feel much more in control of their lives, they feel much more in control of their work. They're able to work in an environment which might be much more conducive to their overall health and wellbeing. The other side of that coin is though, it can lead to other forms of bullying, it can lead of course to cyber bullying, which we all know about, but it can lead to bullying through exclusion.

It can lead to missed opportunities for people who aren't in the workplace and engaging and embracing with others on a regular basis. So, I think we really need to be quite careful with it. Certainly, I would say that the benefits on working from home outweigh the disadvantages, but we can't just say to people, "Work from home," and then forget about them. We've got to make sure that the support continues into that environment, that the regular communication channels stay open. That we have to accept that

most of the work we do these days, most of the work-related communication is going to be hybrid. Some people will be sitting in the room, some people will be sitting behind the screen. We've got to ensure that work practices accept and embrace, and indeed I'd say encourage both of those practices. But we can't just think that because they're not in the office, we don't need to worry about them.

We've got to make sure that the appropriate practices apply to work wherever work is done. And I think also, for some employees, working from home can also be quite an isolating situation, it can further exacerbate problems. Where people are working in a home environment that might have conflict in it or that might not have the capacity for people to be able to work properly. That can have impacts on their mental health and wellbeing as well. So, it's really very much a circumstantial situation. We've got to have the capacity to work individually with workers in some cases, but I think particularly for teams of workers to be able to work together to find the ways that best suit their working arrangements.

And of course, for managers to be in there proactively supporting that, because there's benefits to employers by having people working in different locations as well, of course. And employers must ensure that those benefits are equally shared, and the proper protections and support are provided to workers regardless of where they're working.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

And Sarah, your experience, not only are you working, as you mentioned before in that very challenging context of Suicide Prevention, Mental Health Reform, but clearly you are managing teams who are working remotely. What have you been doing to make sure that you are providing the best possible work environment for the people who work with you?

SARAH HAWKE:

And I think it is very individual and a double-edged sword, as Greg mentioned, but setting up really good supervision and support is even more important to manage remote working. It's got to be more regular. There's got to be greater thought and consideration being

put into how you communicate, where more efforts to talk on the phone or virtually, rather than sending emails which are capable of being misunderstood and compensating for those usual casual conversations that you would have in the office about how work is delegated is really important to think carefully about with interstate and remote staff who can feel isolated and disconnected and setting up those opportunities to do teamwork.

There are some really good resources like Miro and we've purchased a few products that we can interactively engage, even doing quizzes to enable more social participation. For staff in our central office, we have established team days to connect, but outside of this for interstate staff, we've supported them to establish a staff network who meet with me regularly to provide feedback about what we can do better or differently to support and engage them in our work across the teams and make up for those face-to-face conversations and opportunities. It's really important, I think, to try and create some face-to-face opportunities around team branch planning where you make the most of having the time in the office to create that social connection and relationship building opportunities.

And for us, we've had a great initiative in establishing a Culture Club where we have portfolios and representatives from across teams. And those representatives mostly include our interstate staff, and they're responsible for coming up with initiatives to promote communication and connection as well as in areas of understanding across the work of teams, learning and development, social enhancements and wellbeing is a real key focus of the Culture Club. And again, they meet regularly with me to guide us in what we can do better and differently to connect our remote and interstate staff. I think in many ways working in mental health and suicide prevention, it's kind of easier to invite conversations about wellbeing.

And we're fortunate to work with organisations like, R U OK?, OzHelp and Mates in Construction to name a few, who do amazing wellbeing initiatives in the workplace that we can learn a lot from.

And I think I'd really encourage all staff in thinking about how you work both with your teams face-to-face and remotely to have a look at the APSC's Compassionate Foundations training, which is a really interactive six module training suite that supports people to build their interpersonal and self-care skills. It's really about being a good human and fostering positive interactions, including how to manage those virtually. And really good lived experience representation and feedback in the interactive modules to create space to connect and support and empower people.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

And Greg, final question to you about advice to employers, but also to employees in order to continue to develop and strengthen the foundations for psychosocial, psychologically safe workplaces. What's some final piece of advice you'd be able to give perhaps even to our Public Sector audience out there about how they can contribute to this?

GREG VINES:

Well, look, I think it's incredibly important. We've recently seen the report from the Robodebt Inquiry, which is of major, major concern, the findings of that, I think right across the Public Service. Comcare has been working for over the last few months with the Public Service Commission on the relationship between integrity and psychosocial health. And I think that for the traditional role of public servants and particularly public servants who are involved in providing advice to governments, there are a range of issues that we've got to ensure are present in the workplace or present in those relationships in some cases.

And I think also it's important that when we're looking at the Public Sector that we think of it and the need for better information, better understanding, not just applying to the Public Service workers themselves, but also to our political masters. We need to ensure that there's proper training to members of Parliament, to Ministers around what a respectful workplace means. The traditional role of the frank and fearless advice of the Public Servant, a healthy psychosocial work environment is absolutely critical for that. We can't have confidence that people will be able to give that frank and

fearless advice if they feel at risk of intimidation or of some other sort of punitive action of isolation or whatever it may be.

So, there's got to be, as I indicated earlier, that trust and respect is the foundation, I think, to all of the relationships and the service delivery in the Public Sector. There's got to be that open communication. There's got to be that opportunity for people to give alternative views, to give alternative advice, and for that to be received in a respectful way, even if it's not accepted, even if it's not agreed with. And so, it's really just trying to consistently or constantly demonstrate proper practices in the workplace, proper respect and dignity in the workplace to take account of employee wellbeing. As I indicated before, there is no question that the most effective organisations, the most productive organisations, the organisations that attract and retain staff are those that provide that support in the workplace, those that recognise the risks there are to workers every single day.

And so, we've got to be consulting, we've got to be talking, we've got to be providing that safe space in the workplace for people to bring themselves to work, to really throw themselves into work in a way where they're not feeling as if they're going to be subject to discrimination, harassment, isolation, or some other sort of negative action against them. So, it's really something where we've all got a part to play in, employees themselves, teammates, managers, business owners, politicians. We've got to really take this seriously, I think, and not just think it's something that is a bit of a fad. I can assure you it's not a bit of a fad. It's one of the most potentially damaging environments for work, for productivity, for proper services being delivered to the public. So, we really do need to take this seriously for the strength of the Public Sector.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Well, certainly the earlier data that you gave us about a third of Comcare claims are now in this space certainly highlights that this is really not a trivial issue at all. But Sarah, perhaps just a final question to you, because Greg raised that issue there about frank and fearless advice and having that psychological safety in providing frank and fearless advice. As a practitioner, as a Senior

Public Servant, how do you feel about that? This is obviously a topic of importance, but in terms of that role of providing frank and fearless advice.

SARAH HAWKE:

Yeah, absolutely. Psychological safety is absolutely essential to creating an open and consultative environment for public servants to be able to provide frank and fearless advice. As we know, people become fearful when they don't feel safe, which negatively impacts on their confidence, their capacity to work effectively and assess and manage risk, as well as relationships in the workplace. And unfortunately, that often flows into home. For me, it's about being authentic, open, creating trust, and that takes time. And you've got to make the time to check in with staff and seek feedback.

I make sure I have one-on-ones with all staff a couple of times a year and create that open door and invitation for people to come and raise concerns with me if they're not able to manage them within teams. So, on a day-to-day or weekly basis, it really looks like creating as much opportunity as we can for communication, having honest conversations about risks and pressures and established mechanisms like our Culture Club to ensure that people are able to contribute to wellbeing programs, ideas, and opportunities to learn and develop and feel empowered and excited about contributing and participating in work.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Well, Sarah Hawke and Greg Vines, thank you so much for being so generous with your time and your expertise today. This is clearly a very important issue. It's an important issue for productivity. It's an important issue in terms of being able to manage change effectively. And indeed with the issue being on the Secretary's Board Agenda, certainly that's going to give it the profiles inside the APS that it's a constant work on because the loud and clear message from both of you is that it's like painting the Harbour Bridge, it's a job that's never going to be done, and it's one of those things that you can only ever continuously improve.

But to be aware, and it sounds like with both the Comcare resources and also with the Public Service Commission resources

as well, that there is an adequate amount of learning, training and development and those resources that are available to people to make sure that they're aware, but when they engage in these practices that they do so from a place of knowledge and understanding. So, thank you very much for being with us on Work with Purpose today. And to you, the audience, thank you for coming back once again. Indeed, if you'd like to follow IPAA ACT and contentgroup on LinkedIn, you will pick up the latest information from Work with Purpose. But also, if you have any suggestions about the program, please email events@act.ipaa.org.au, if you have any suggestions or questions or otherwise.

Work with Purpose is produced in collaboration between Content Group and the Institute of Public Administration of Australia ACT and supported by the Australian Public Service Commission. If you do have time to give us a rating or review on your favourite podcast catcher, whether it's Spotify, Apple Podcast, Stitcher, Google, wherever you gather your podcast, if you did have time to give us a rating or review, it does help the podcast to be found. So, a big thanks once again to Sarah Hawke and to Greg Vines for joining us once again today.

My name is David Pembroke, and we'll be back at the same time in two weeks with another episode of Work with Purpose. But for the moment, it's bye for now.