CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE WORKPLACE – 7 GUIDING FACTORS

There are no losers when it comes to creating a psychologically safe workplace. The impact of a psychologically healthy and safe work environment is a win-win for employers and employees. It is a simple and proven business case of improving workforce productivity by safeguarding the psychological health of employees. The trend so far has revealed that employers who take the time to invest in the psychological health of employees reap the financial rewards of a safe, stable and engaged workforce. In recognizing the significance of a psychologically healthy workforce, many employers have expanded their occupational health and safety (OHS) standards to include both the physical and mental health of workers. This makes perfect business sense as the legislative landscape for health and safety practices is now targeting the total well-being of employees.

The recent amendment to the *WSIB Operational Policy Manual (OPM)* effective January 18, 2018 shows policy revisions for claims regarding chronic mental stress and traumatic mental stress. The policy amendments will result in new employee entitlements to mental health claims. This is a clear signal that top business priorities should involve steering organizations along a sustainable path of mental care. The *Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC)* has championed the way to assist employers in providing programs for the mental well being of their employees. This voluntary National Standard issued by the MHCC establishes a list of standards that are critical to the psychological health and safety of workers. Organizations have now been awakened to the dawn of a new approach to workplace health and safety. The focus is not just protecting employees from physical injuries, as stipulated by OHS regulations, but integrating mental health standards to promote the psychological well-being of employees.

Embodied in the National Standard are some important factors that can transform an organization in a psychologically safe environment. Some major factors to consider are: -

1. **Psychological Support:** An organization that is psychologically supportive is proactive in implementing a framework that safeguards the mental health of workers. Employers that commit resources to identify and reduce the risks of psychological workplace illness or injury are demonstrating their regard for the mental well-being of employees. The long-term effect of this is more loyal and committed employees.

2. **Civility and Respect**: If the workplace is an environment that engenders esteem, care and consideration in every day interaction, as well as recognition of diverse values then employees will feel a strong sense of affiliation with the organization. This fosters harmonious interpersonal relationships, high spirits and good mental health.

3. **Workload Management:** The demands and constraints of the workplace have been proven by experts to be a major work life stressor. The root causes can often be traced to inadequate resources, unrealistic deadlines, inappropriate job skills, and improper monitoring of the labour pool in relation to expectations. The consequential outcome involves employees that are overwhelmed, fatigued and even hostile to others. Proper workload management will lead to greater job satisfaction and better quality work outputs.

4. **Effective Leadership**: At the core of sustaining a psychologically healthy workplace is a leadership team that institutes proper control measures that support mental health. Where there is no reporting structure or system to a deal with job incidents that are psychologically injuries or emotionally disturbing, the occurrence of low productivity, high absenteeism, and low staff morale will become accompanying challenges. Training managers to spot workplace challenges

that may create or worsen the mental health of employees is no longer an option but a requirement.

5. **Organizational Culture:** Cultivating a positive work culture where support, trust, honesty and fairness are embraced is laying the groundwork for a psychologically healthy workplace. Where the workplace culture is positive there is more collaboration and social support among employees. A good social support system reduces psychological distress and is a driving force for good mental health. Organizations with a positive work culture enjoy the benefits of workers who are more committed and supportive of new initiatives.

6. **Growth and Development:** Providing opportunities for employees to build their repertoire of skills is important. In an era of automated work processes and blending of different generations, the need for new skills and personal development opportunities become even more essential. The growth and development opportunities should be inclusive and supportive, addressing the unique needs of each employee. This serves as an excellent strategy for workforce commitment and loyalty. Employees who struggle to measure up to job demands often experience anxieties and job detachment.

7. **Work life Balance**: As employees juggle workplace stress and other aspects of their lives, many still struggle to achieve a sense of balance in their responsibilities. If hours spent at work are excessively long, sooner or later feelings of stress, strained home relationships and other health problems take over. Conversely, neglecting work responsibilities to carry out family duties may lead to unfulfilled job responsibilities. Employers who implement flexible work arrangements and impose reasonable job demands are clearly supporting healthy work life balance.

At Pesce & Associates, our consultants have years of experience in creating and shaping the culture of workplaces. Investing in workplace practices to preserve the mental health of workers will ultimately lead to reduced accidents, absenteeism and insurance costs. If you are looking to create a psychologically safe work environment, we have the expertise to transform your organization.

For more information, please visit our website at www.pesceassociates.com, contact your Senior Consultant or Elizabeth Hill, Managing Partner, at 416- 491-1501 extension 23 or ehill@pesceassciates.com.