

Leaders Information Framework for a Psychologically Healthy and Safe Workplace

Improving Organizational Results and Individual Psychological Well-being - Leader Role

In any given year, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health estimates that one in five Canadians experience a mental illness or addiction. By the age of 40, reports suggest one in two Canadians have or have had a mental illness. In any given week, it is believed that 500,000 employed Canadians are unable to work as a result of mental health concerns. Mental illness costs the Canadian economy in excess of \$51 billion annually through health-care expenses and loss of productivity. The cost of a disability leave for mental illness is approximately twice the cost of a physical health leave.¹

Our campus experience is not dissimilar, according to our indicators of health and disability. For the fourth year (as of 2019), Human Resource Services has recorded a higher percentage of mental health cases than musculoskeletal cases. Forty-six percent of Employee and Family Assistance Program users sought support to deal specifically with psychological concerns. While the prevalence of mental health can be concerning, mounting evidence suggests that promotion, prevention and early intervention yield a positive return on investment.¹ The University of Alberta views an increased level of early access to preventative, proactive supports to be encouraging.

The workplace health focus has broadened from primarily physical health to include mental health as a result of an emerging duty of care in the legal system. The duty to provide a psychologically safe/healthy workplace requires a culture where mentally injurious conduct is not tolerated and where there is strong support for respect and fairness.

Such an environment fosters innovation, collaboration, creativity and ingenuity, which are the sparks of growth for the University. Other benefits include reduced absenteeism, presenteeism (people being at work but not being productive, for a variety of reasons), benefits costs, WCB claims, and disability rates. These strategies also improve or increase employee engagement, sustainability, recruitment, retention, health and safety.

Psychologically Safe Workplace Context

A **psychologically healthy** workplace is one where every reasonable effort is made to **promote** mental health through awareness, resources and education.

A **psychologically safe** workplace is one where every reasonable effort is made to **prevent harm** to mental health through negligent, reckless or deliberate mentally injurious conduct.

Thirteen psychosocial risk factors² known to directly impact psychological safety are:

1. **Psychological support:** an environment where psychological and mental health concerns are supported and responded to appropriately
2. **Organizational culture:** the environment is characterized by trust, honesty and fairness
3. **Leadership and expectations:** effective leadership exists that enables individuals to know what to do, how their work contributes to the goals of the organization, and if change is approaching
4. **Civility and respect:** staff and faculty are respectful, considerate and collegial with one another
5. **Psychological competencies and requirements:** a staff member's interpersonal/emotional competencies and job skills are appropriate for the position
6. **Growth and development:** staff members receive encouragement and support in the development of interpersonal, emotional and job skills
7. **Recognition and reward:** acknowledgement and appreciation of staff member's efforts in a fair and timely manner
8. **Involvement and influence:** individuals are included in discussions about how work is done, how decisions are made, and the impact of those decisions on the work
9. **Workload management:** tasks and responsibilities can be accomplished successfully within the time available
10. **Engagement:** staff members enjoy and feel connected to their work and are motivated to do a good job
11. **Balance:** recognition and support for balance between the demands of work, family and personal life
12. **Psychological protection:** an environment in which psychological safety is ensured
13. **Protection of physical safety:** appropriate action to protect employees' physical safety at work

Why Is this significant?

Research has demonstrated that staff who consistently experience high stress and low satisfaction at work suffer consequences in terms of both personal health and capacity. The following list shows the negative consequences when individuals perceive a lack of support or fairness in the workplace.⁶

Health Consequences

- 3 times the incidence of cardiac problems
- 3 times the incidence of back pain
- 5 times the incidence of certain types of cancer
- 2–3 times the incidence of mental illness
- 2–3 times the incidence of conflicts
- 2–3 times the incidence of infections
- 2–3 times the incidence of substance abuse

Capacity Consequences

- Reduced adaptability
- Reduced ability to cope with change
- Impaired learning
- Impaired memory
- Increased helplessness
- Increased aggression and conflict or passivity

- 2–3 times the incidence of injuries

Strategies:

Institutional: The institution is responsible for providing a policy/procedural framework and proactive practices that build a psychologically and physically safe environment, and for endorsing and rewarding a culture of civility, respect and equity.

Departmental: The departments and faculties have a leadership role to embed and enhance the understanding of the psychosocial risk factors into their day-to-day functions.

Individual: Individuals have a personal responsibility to ensure that their behaviours do not negatively impact others in a negligent, reckless or intentional way. As ambassadors for the University, individuals model the culture through respect, collegiality, and civility.

The focus on a psychologically healthy/safe work and learning environment fits within the University's strategic plan, the Healthy University Strategic Plan, the Strategic Plan for Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity, amongst others. This framework is proactive in nature. It is intended to allow for safe disclosure of concerns, and educate all university community members to recognize ways that work environments are not safeguarding the psychological health of members.

Many aspects directly relate to management of human resources, and are also reflected in the Human Resource Services strategic initiatives.

Various tools and audits are available to assess work environments, and their strategic implementation may enhance productivity and engagement within the workplace. This proactive approach aids in preventing persons at risk from going off work and provides tools to support leaders and work units in addressing behaviours/situations that are mentally injurious.

1. Psychological Support

Why is psychological support important? The more individuals feel they have psychological support, the greater their job attachment, job commitment, job satisfaction, job involvement, positivity, desire to remain with the organization, organizational citizenship behaviours and job performance.

The most important aspect of psychological support may be that it is especially helpful in protecting against traumatic stressors at work.

Workplaces with proactive management of mental health include preventative services and stress reduction resources to achieve an overall increase in productivity.⁷

- Psychological support is present in a work environment in which coworkers and supervisors are supportive of individuals' psychological and mental health concerns and respond appropriately as needed.

- Equally important are the individuals' perceptions and their awareness of organizational support
- When individuals perceive organizational support, it means they believe the organization values their contributions, is committed to ensuring their psychological well-being and provides meaningful support if this well-being is compromised.

When adequate psychological support is present, individuals experiencing psychological distress will be more likely to seek and receive appropriate health care, will be better equipped to stay safe and productive at work while they recover, and, if an absence is required, will be more likely to have a quicker and sustainable return to work.

When psychological support is lacking, you see increased absenteeism, withdrawal behaviours, strain, conflict, and turnover. Strain can then lead to greater issues such as fatigue, headaches, burnout, and anxiety. A workplace with good psychological support would be able to state that:

1. Our workplace offers services or benefits that adequately address individual psychological health.
2. Our supervisors would say or do something helpful if an individual looked distressed while at work.
3. Individuals feel supported in our workplace when they are dealing with personal or family issues.
4. Our workplace supports individuals who are returning to work after time off due to a mental health condition.
5. People in our workplace have a good understanding of the importance of individual mental health.

2. Organizational Culture

Organizational culture defines the philosophy, values, norms, beliefs, attitudes and, ultimately, the actions of the organization itself. The culture of the organization defines how we behave and affects how people experience the organization. Activities such as this are evidenced through the University's Strategic Plan for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity, where it indicates that the University "will work to achieve an accessible, equitable and inclusive community of students, faculty, and staff, that supports our learning environment shaped by curiosity, rigorous inquiry, respect, and a culture of human rights." The following are sample characteristics of an organizational culture that is psychologically safe:

- A work culture is characterized by trust, honesty and fairness.
- Concerning attitudes and actions are addressed.
- Assumptions, beliefs, values and ways of interacting are agreed upon by a group. Group members hold values and beliefs in common and use them as behavioural problem-solving cues.

A workplace with a positive organizational culture would be able to state:

1. All people in our workplace are held accountable for their actions
2. People at work show sincere respect for others' ideas, values and beliefs.
3. Difficult situations at work are addressed effectively.
4. Individuals feel that they are part of a community at work.
5. Individuals and those in leadership roles trust one another.

3. Clear Leadership and Expectations

Leadership is the foundation for the success of any organization. Effective leadership increases individual morale, resiliency, and trust, and decreases frustration and conflict. Good leadership leads to individuals being 40% more likely to be in the highest category of job well-being, and a 27% reduction in sick leave of individuals.⁸ A leader who demonstrates a commitment to maintaining their own physical and psychological health can influence the health of individuals as well as the health of the organization as a whole. Some managers are often at greater risk due to the fact that they must simultaneously be leaders and be led. If not managed appropriately, this creates competing demands and role conflict that can lead to feelings of powerlessness and stress.

- Effective leadership is evident when there is support that helps individuals understand their role and what is expected from them, how their work contributes to the organization, and whether there are impending changes.
- Leadership styles impact psychosocial safety and health in different ways.
 - **Instrumental leadership** focuses primarily on producing outcomes, with little attention paid to the “big picture”, the psychosocial dynamics within the organization, and, unfortunately, little attention paid to the well-being of individuals.
 - **Transformational leaders** are seen as change agents who motivate their followers to do more than what is expected. They are concerned with long-term objectives and they transmit vision, mission and purpose. They are people-focussed, give individualized consideration to their colleagues, stimulate intellectual capabilities in others, and inspire their teams.

A workplace with clear leadership and expectations would be able to state that:

1. People know what is expected of them and have role clarity.
2. Leadership is effective.
3. Faculty and staff members are informed about important changes at work in a timely manner.
4. Supervisors provide regular supportive and proactive feedback to faculty and staff members on their performance.
5. The organization provides clear, effective and timely communication.

4. Civility and Respect

Civility and respect are essential behaviours for all members of any organization. The prevalence of issues relating to lack of civility and respect in Canadian workplaces is concerning with a recent survey suggesting “one in two Canadians have experienced bullying in the workplace.”⁹

- Civility and respect is present in a work environment where staff and faculty are respectful and considerate in their thoughts and interactions with one another, students, clients and the public.
- Civility and respect are based on showing esteem, care and consideration for others and acknowledging dignity.

When a workplace lacks civility and respect, this can lead to emotional exhaustion amongst staff. An uncivil and disrespectful workplace is associated with greater conflict and job withdrawal. A workplace that is uncivil and disrespectful also exposes organizations to the threat of grievances and complaints. Examples of disrespectful behaviour include discrimination, harassment and bullying. Exposure to workplace bullying and harassment are associated with psychological complaints/concerns, depression, burnout, anxiety, aggression, psychosomatic complaints and musculoskeletal health complaints.

A workplace with good civility and respect would be able to say that:

1. People treat each other with dignity, respect and consideration in our workplace.
2. Our workplace effectively manages interpersonal dynamics that exist between staff and faculty.
3. People from all backgrounds, identities and genders are treated fairly and equitably in our workplace.
4. People develop the skills to manage and resolve conflict. It is expected that disagreements are handled in respectful and appropriate ways.

5. Psychological Competencies and Requirements

Emotional intelligence is a key factor in any human relationship, it is the skill that allows us to understand, manage and regulate emotion.

- A work environment where psychological competencies exist is one in which there is a good match between individuals' interpersonal and emotional competencies, their skills and the position they hold.
- This means the individuals not only hold the technical expertise and knowledge for a particular position, but they also have the psychosocial skills and emotional intelligence to perform their role.
- Emotional intelligence includes self awareness, regulation, persistence, motivation, empathy and social deftness.

Often, when evaluating performance or hiring for a role, emphasis is on technical skills only. High emphasis also needs to be placed on so-called soft skills that enable people to be successful when interacting with others. It is more important that individuals feel that their job is a good match for their broad range of skills, aligns to their sense of their own potential, and provides a sense of fulfillment.

A workplace with good psychological competencies and requirements would be able to state that:

1. Interpersonal competencies are considerations in hiring/promotion decisions to ensure appropriateness for the position.

2. The organization hires people who have the technical skills and professional acumen for the role, and who bring a diversity of identities, thoughts, and perspectives to the organization.
3. Individuals have the interpersonal and emotional competencies needed to do their jobs well.
4. Supervisors believe that interpersonal competencies are as valuable as other skills.
5. Roles make meaningful use of individuals' personal strengths.

6. Growth and Development

Ongoing access to growth and development opportunities allows individuals to remain competent and relevant in their careers. As the University's *Report and Recommendations on Enriching Learning, Professional Development and Mentoring for Staff, Faculty and Postdoctoral Fellows* noted, "Organizations with strong learning cultures tend to exhibit stronger alignment of efforts with organizational goals, better organizational performance, increased retention, and increased levels of employee engagement".

- Growth and development is valued in organizations where staff members receive encouragement and support in the development of their interpersonal, emotional and job skills.
- Such workplaces provide a range of internal and external opportunities for individuals to build their repertoire of competencies, which will not only help with their current jobs, but will also prepare them for possible future positions.

A workplace with growth and development would be able to state that:

1. Faculty and staff receive ongoing feedback at work that helps them grow and develop.
2. Supervisors are open to ideas for taking on new opportunities and challenges.
3. Faculty and staff have opportunities for career mobility within their organization.
4. The organization values individuals' ongoing growth and development.
5. Faculty and staff have the opportunity to develop their skills at work.

7. Recognition and Reward

Recognition and reward is a critical component of basic needs in the workplace environment. An organization that creates a culture of appreciation has higher key business outcomes.¹⁰

- Recognition and reward are present in a work environment where there is appropriate acknowledgement and appreciation of individuals' efforts in a genuine, equitable and timely manner.
- This includes appropriate and financial compensation as well as individual or team celebrations, institutional and local retirement and years of service, and/or milestones reached.
- An imbalance between effort and reward is a significant contributor to burnout and emotional distress.

A workplace with good recognition and reward would be able to state that:

1. Immediate supervisors demonstrate genuine appreciation of individuals' work.

2. Individuals are compensated equitably for the work they do.
3. The organization appreciates extra effort made by individuals.
4. The organization celebrates shared accomplishments.
5. The workplace values individuals' commitment and passion for their work.

8. Involvement and Influence

When individuals are involved in workplace decisions, they become invested not only in the outcome of those decisions but also the overall success of the organization.

- Involvement and influence is present when staff members are included in discussions about how their work is done and how important decisions are made.
- Opportunities for involvement can relate to an individuals' specific job, the activities of a team or department, or issues involving the organization as a whole.

If individuals do not believe they have a voice in the work of the organization, they are likely to feel a sense of disengagement and resentment. Job alienation, or non-involvement, is associated with cynicism, distress, greater turnover, and burnout.

A workplace with good involvement and influence would be able to state that:

1. Individuals feel comfortable speaking with their immediate supervisors about work challenges, ideas, and processes.
2. Individuals have decision-making ability over how they organize their work.
3. Input is encouraged from everyone on important decisions related to their work, and leaders transparently acknowledge when input is not possible or appropriate.
4. Opinions and suggestions are given due consideration by the work group.
5. Staff and faculty members are informed of important changes that may impact how their work is done.

9. Workload

Workload management is important because there is a unique relationship between job demands, intellectual demands and job satisfaction. Psychosocial factors are elements that impact an individual's psychological responses to work and work conditions, potentially causing psychological health problems.

- A manageable workload is present if tasks and responsibilities can be accomplished successfully within the time available.
- Research has demonstrated that it is not just the amount of work that makes a difference but also the extent to which individuals have the resources (time, equipment, support) to do the work well.

Leaders need to ensure that workloads are not causing excess or unrelenting strain on their people. Job demands can reduce job satisfaction, whereas intellectual fulfillment or decision-making latitude

increase job satisfaction. Even during times of high pressure, individuals can thrive when they have choices, and when they feel supported to ensure that their stress remains manageable. Having high decision-making latitude allows for positive coping behaviours to be learned and experienced.

Without opportunities for autonomy in determining work priorities and how work will get done, individuals may experience physical, psychological and emotional fatigue, and increased stress and strain. This has a negative influence on performance. Emotionally fatigued individuals may also have a diminished sense of personal accomplishment and an increased sense of inadequacy. A workplace with good workload management would be able to state that:

1. The amount of work individuals are expected to do is reasonable for their positions.
2. People feel they can talk to their supervisor about work volumes and participate in problem-solving.
3. Individuals have access to the equipment and resources needed to do their jobs well.
4. An individuals' work is free from unnecessary interruptions and disruptions.
5. Individuals have a say in prioritizing tasks and responsibilities when facing multiple demands.

10. Engagement

The importance of employee engagement is well-documented. In the workplace, high employee engagement results in reduced absenteeism and turnover. For individuals, high employee engagement results in increased satisfaction, a heightened sense of connection and pride, and better overall quality of work. In Canadian workplaces, reports suggest that only 27% of the workforce are considered highly engaged, with confidence in senior leadership being the most influential driver of engagement, followed by the quality of relationship with their supervisor.¹¹

- Individuals enjoy their work, feel connected to their work, and feel motivated to do their job well.
- Individual engagement can be physical, emotional and/or cognitive.
- Cognitively engaged individuals devote more attention to their work and are truly invested.
- Engaged individuals feel connected to their work because they can relate to, and are committed to, the overall success and purpose of the organization.

Engagement is similar to, but should not be mistaken for: job satisfaction, job involvement, organizational commitment, psychological empowerment, and intrinsic motivation.

A workplace with good engagement would be able to state that:

1. Faculty and staff enjoy their work.
2. They are willing to devote discretionary time at work if needed.
3. They describe work as an integral part of who they are.
4. They are committed to the success of the organization.
5. They are proud of the work they do and where they work.

11. Balance

The demands of work, family, and personal lives can be difficult to separate from each other. A workplace that acknowledges a holistic view of health and well-being recognizes the need for harmony between individuals' various life roles.

This factor reflects the fact that everyone has multiple life roles: as professor, colleague, parent, partner, etc. This complexity is enriching and allows fulfillment of individual strengths and responsibilities, but contradictory or incompatible responsibilities across different domains of our lives can lead to role conflict or overload.

One source of imbalance is conflict between work and family roles. When the workplace recognizes that work/life balance is important, leaders can provide greater flexibility and help individuals effectively manage conflicting priorities. This flexibility helps minimize conflict by supporting individuals in accomplishing the various tasks necessary in their daily lives. Balance reduces stress and the possibility that home issues will spill over into work and vice versa, allowing people to maintain concentration, confidence, responsibility, and a sense of control over their work.

A workplace with good balance would be able to state that:

1. The workplace encourages individuals to take care of themselves (e.g., taking breaks, not consistently eating lunch at one's desk, sick time, vacation time, parental leave, etc.).
2. Individuals are able to reasonably balance the demands of work and personal life.
3. The workplace promotes work/life harmony.
4. Individuals feel safe sharing when they are having trouble maintaining work/life balance.
5. Individuals have energy left at the end of most work days for their personal commitments.

12. Psychological Protection

Psychological protection is present in a work environment where individuals' psychological safety is ensured. Under the *Alberta Occupational Health and Safety Act*, employers must take all reasonable actions to create and maintain safe workplaces.

- Workplace psychological safety is demonstrated when individuals feel able to ask questions, seek and provide feedback, share problems, or propose a new idea, without fearing negative reprisal to themselves, their jobs or their careers.
- A psychologically safe and healthy workplace actively promotes emotional well-being among individuals while taking all reasonable steps to minimize impacts to individual mental health.

A workplace with good psychological protection would be able to state that:

1. Immediate supervisors, managers, and leaders genuinely care about individuals' emotional well-being.

2. The organization acts in ways to prevent and mitigate harm from harassment, discrimination or violence.
3. Faculty and staff would describe the workplace as psychologically healthy, and having a sense of community.
4. The organization deals effectively with situations that may cause harm to individuals (e.g. sexual violence, toxic workplaces, gossip, microaggressions, etc.). This includes situations that may be acute (high-intensity, temporary, or brief instances), in addition to long-standing, or long-lasting, patterns, both acute and protracted in duration.
5. There is a sense of trust both felt and demonstrated between faculty, staff and leaders.

13. Protection of Physical Safety

Individuals who feel a sense of physical safety at work have increased satisfaction, and more opportunity to flourish in their roles. The Occupational Health and Safety Act and Workers' Compensation Act outline responsibilities for employers to prevent work-related injuries and fatalities.

- Individuals have the equipment needed to reduce the impact of physical risks on health (e.g. proper lighting, noise reduction, panic alarms, ventilation, etc.) at work.
- Managers and supervisors recognize the impact of incidents and workplace-related illnesses on psychological and physical well-being.
- Safety programs and policies are reviewed regularly and are integrated into the workplace culture.

Those who perceive that their workplace protects their physical safety will feel more secure and engaged at work. Research has shown that when employees have higher levels of confidence in safety protection at work, they experience lower rates of psychological distress and mental health problems. A sense of physical safety protection is enhanced by:

- adequate training
- employer transparency about physical hazards and effort to reduce hazards
- confidence that the employer responds quickly and effectively to safety incidents
- the opportunity to have meaningful input into workplace policies and practices

A workplace with good protocols for protection of physical safety would be able to state that:

1. Those in leadership roles take appropriate action to support employees' physical safety at work.
2. Our workplace offers sufficient training to help promote employees' physical safety at work (e.g., emergency preparedness, safe lifting, and violence prevention).
3. When incidents occur and/or risks are identified, our workplace responds efficiently and effectively.
4. Faculty and staff have the equipment and tools they need to do their job in a physically safe way (e.g., protective clothing, adequate lighting, and ergonomic seating).
5. The workplace responds appropriately when workers raise concerns about physical safety (e.g., Workplace Impairment Policy).

Notes

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All Information directly modified from:

Canadian Standards Association SA Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace www.csagroup.org, Workplace Strategies for Mental Health www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/

Guarding Minds @ Work www.guardingmindsatwork.ca/