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OTS SERVING THE COMMUNITY IN DIFFERENT HATS

Fostering Your Practice's Culture to Benefit Your Community

Anna Pannuzzo, Director, WorkplacePLUS

Culture is the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a society. In a similar frame, your workplace culture is very much a microcosm of a society. The character, feel, and functionality of your workplace is influenced by a number of factors, including the personalities in your team, your workplace policies and practices, and the organisational vision, values, and strategy. But ultimately, culture stems from the top.

The role of leadership is to walk the talk.

A great example of this is the leadership team of Bunnings Australia and New Zealand. Managing Director Michael Schneider is known for his collaborative, genuine, and honest leadership style. He believes the ability of team members to connect with customers and the local community is key to business success. This requires an ongoing investment in building the best team, as well as creating a culture that builds trust, inspires action, develops people, and drives performance. This is reflected in high staff retention rates, strong *engagement* of women in executive roles, and solid revenue and earnings growth.

Leadership style plays an integral role in modelling the values and culture of your workplace. Your organisational values, policies, code of conduct, and strategic plan may paint an idyllic picture of a respectful, inclusive, eco-sustainable,

mentally healthy team culture, but is this reflected in your actions?

- Are you making ethical, best-practice business decisions?
- Do you address workplace issues promptly using procedural fairness?
- Do you provide your staff with regular feedback, training, recognition, and opportunities for continuous improvement?
- Do you solicit feedback from key stakeholders?
- Are you meeting the needs of the community?

Whether you are the owner of a small private practice, or the head of a large health care organisation, it is important to recognise that your workplace culture also impacts your local community. Here are some examples below.

Local jobs and local commerce:

Employment is essential to the local community, providing jobs and stability while boosting other local businesses when your workforce shops, eats, or runs errands locally. A positive work culture can help attract and retain great employees, whereas a negative or dysfunctional work culture can cause high staff turnover.

Servicing the community: Your clientele is directly impacted by your

work culture, including staff levels of courtesy and protocols for the safe and efficient delivery of service.

Identity and community spirit: Your private practice or health care facility contributes to the character and identity of your local community. If your work culture includes community outreach (e.g. sponsoring a local club or joining a business chamber or association), this can help boost community spirit and strengthen business-to-business camaraderie and support.

Reputation and trust: A positive workplace culture is naturally beneficial to your brand reputation, but it also contributes to the broader sense of community spirit and identity. Problems arise, however, when your workplace displays the red flags of a toxic culture, such as:

- Workplace conflict, incidents, complaints and claims
- High turnover, absenteeism, and lateness
- Poor attitudes, engagement, performance, and productivity
- Poor communication and lack of support

The impact of a toxic work culture can be seen not only in financial costs, reputational

damage and poor employee mental health, but also in the downward spiral of community mistrust.

Safety: Employers have a duty under work, health and safety laws to provide a safe workplace. The impact of your culture around workplace safety affects not only your employees but any visitors, contractors, customers or clients. The trials of 2020 have brought social responsibility and health and safety to the forefront for us all, with employers having to implement new COVIDSafe protocols and carefully monitor employee mental health.

Leaders should be proactive about fostering a healthy workplace culture. This means modelling the organisational values, reviewing and assessing the workplace culture, addressing signs of workplace conflict early, and following a best practice change strategy when significant organisational changes are needed.

When structural or cultural change is needed in a high-pressure workplace such as a hospital or an emergency department, this can be very challenging for leadership and all members of staff. Failing to act appropriately can have severe community consequences and is not an option.

In 2019, the ABC television Four Corners episode *Health Hazard* exposed catastrophic failures in Australia's health care system, particularly in regional and rural hospitals where patients have died or been permanently disabled due to medical mistakes. The report by Louise Milligan, which aired 9 September 2019, revealed under-resourced regional hospitals with staff run off their feet, with serious concerns for clinical governance and patient safety.

"I spoke to the general manager. I said that I was concerned about the culture in the department, that staff weren't listening, and I felt that if we didn't try and change this culture, there could be a catastrophic event." — Former nursing manager, Broken Hill Base Hospital, Max McLean

Attending to the workplace culture should be a regular part of every organisation's risk management plan.

Private practice owners and senior healthcare managers can start by implementing a regular workplace cultural review. This is a proactive process designed to understand the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours shared by the staff. Regular cultural reviews can be the catalyst for constructive workplace change, meaningful community impact, and the continuous improvement of workplace relationships, staff engagement, productivity, safety, and performance.

About the Author

Anna Pannuzzo is the Director of WorkPlacePLUS, OTA's preferred HR provider. OTA members can receive professional support for addressing complex HR issues such as restructuring, bullying and harassment claims, industrial audits, employment agreements, and more. Learn more at www.workplaceplus.com.au or by calling (03) 9492 0958.

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