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SWORD workbook:

KFP 1 Secure Base

Tasks

Dartington

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Box 1.1: How to make your organisation psychologically safe

Lead by example and use self-disclosure:

Managers are role models, and what they do sets standards for behaviour across the organisation. Ask for practitioners' feedback on what you're doing well and not so well; acknowledge your mistakes openly. Be receptive to different opinions; be approachable and encourage people to ask you questions.

Encourage active listening:

This lets people know their opinions matter to you. Make meetings 'phone free' so people can give their full attention to the matter in hand. Demonstrate understanding by repeating what has been said; encourage people to ask questions; make sure everyone has a chance to speak, especially those who are reticent. The section on mindful listening in KFP2 Sense of Appreciation provides more in-depth guidance on improving listening skills.

Create a safe environment:

Make sure people feel comfortable voicing their opinions and can speak their mind without being embarrassed, judged or punished. Work with them to develop some ground rules for personal interactions – e.g. no interruptions, all ideas are accepted equally, never blame or judge.

Keep an open mind:

Trying to see things from a different perspective can provide solutions to seemingly intractable problems. Encourage teams to share feedback widely and help them respond to input from others without defensiveness; encourage individuals and teams to view feedback as a way of strengthening and expanding their ideas and processes (and not as criticism).

Distinguish between psychological safety and accountability:

Acknowledging personal fallibility, and dealing with errors and failure openly and productively, are key to a psychologically safe workplace. Nonetheless, it is important to be supportive and not offer a crutch; organisations that are too psychologically safe can stifle creativity and sanction poor performance.

Box 1.2: How emotionally intelligent am I?

Is my style participatory?

Do I make sure I get 'buy-in' from practitioners for new ideas and change? Do I engage with people in a truly participatory manner to inform decision-making processes?

Do I put people at ease?

Do people find me easy to engage with? Am I culturally competent in understanding that I may need to adjust my communication style?

Am I self-aware?

Am I aware of my strengths and limitations, and do I share this information with others, showing that it is OK not to be good at everything? Do I ensure there are people around me who are better at things I am not so good at? If not, do I know where to seek help?

Do I model good work-life balance?

Do I make sure people notice that I take time out for myself? This shows I understand the importance of self-care and that I can manage my work in a healthy and sustainable way.

Am I able to remain composed?

If I make a mistake, do I remain calm, recover, stay optimistic and learn from the experience?

Can I build and mend relationships?

Am I able to negotiate work-related problems without alienating people? Can I agree to differ, or do I hold a grudge?

Do I show tenacity?

When faced with obstacles, am I able to take action and be responsible for leading a plan, while also taking on the views of others?

Am I decisive?

When needed, can I make a decision and stick to it? Am I able to review the effectiveness of my decisions and adapt them if required?

Do I confront problems with staff?

Am I able to act with authority when necessary without being authoritarian? Do I treat people fairly, even when they disagree with a course of action?

Can I manage change effectively?

Can I implement change initiatives and overcome resistance?

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Box 1.3: Learning to tame your 'inner chimp'

We can only regulate our emotions if we also have an opportunity to express them; this can help us process feelings such as frustration, anger and disgust. So, it's important to vent, to let your inner chimp have its voice in a safe space. Find people (within and outside the workplace) who you can vent to safely. The section on your Personal Board of Directors (see KFP3 Learning Organisation) will help you with this.

We can then begin to address our emotional reaction calmly and allow the human part of our brain to determine a more rational reaction to the situation.

Remember, being angry is perfectly natural and a logical response to some situations, but it is not always proportional or functional. Quick Win 1.1 offers some tips on how to manage anger more effectively.

When we need to divert our inner chimp, it can help to count to ten or use a breathing technique (see Quick Win 1.2) before we voice our initial reactions.

Cognitive behavioural techniques (see the KFP5 Wellbeing section) can also be useful in calming your inner chimp. Strategies to help manage inter-personal conflict are discussed in KFP4 Mission and Vision.

Encouraging practitioners find an appropriate person to vent to (and recognising their need to do so) is important – although as a manager, you may not be the appropriate sounding board.

Box 1.4: How to foster a sense of belonging

Check out how people feel about working in your organisation

As a leader, it's tempting to believe everyone loves working under your leadership, or to become defensive if indicators suggest otherwise. But being open to listening about people's experiences of work is crucial to making them feel heard and understood. The SWORD Tool will help you identify priorities for change and the extent to which people feel they belong in your organisation. However, remember that listening without taking action can alienate, which is the antithesis of fostering belonging.

Getting employees to speak freely can be a challenge. They may be wary of authority figures or may tell you what they think you want to hear. So, to learn what people really think, begin by identifying issues that seem to cause silence, then invite them to lunch or other informal settings to discuss them in a neutral space. You can also consider using employment engagement surveys to establish the feelings of under-represented groups.

Develop trusting work-based relationships

To develop trust, people need to feel truly appreciated for what they bring to an organisation; KFP2 Sense of Appreciation has tips on how to achieve this. Simply put, if people are to feel they belong, they must believe their abilities and contribution are recognised and valued. A workplace that invests in employees' professional development will be repaid by increased commitment and loyalty, as well as improved performance. There is evidence that workers who have a trusting relationship with a mentor are better able to take advantage of critical feedback and learning from their practice. KFP3 Learning Organisation outlines the features of a peer coaching/mentoring scheme that can be used, with minimal cost and set-up time, to encourage a solution focus to workplace issues.

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Box 1.4: How to foster a sense of belonging

Take action on inclusion

Studies in different occupational settings show that making people feel valued for who they are enhances retention. When workers see managers, leaders and co-workers who 'look like them', they are more likely to feel they fit in. So it's important to ensure your workplace represents the community you serve. Excluding people may be unintentional but it can still undermine a sense of belonging. Being culturally competent is an important leadership capability. Guidance on enhancing culturally competent leadership is in KFP4 Mission and Vision.

Knowing there are people who may not come forward with ideas, and making opportunities for everyone to have a voice, underpins a sense of belonging. Actively encouraging inclusion is more than inviting people to meetings (which is important); it means sharing documents beforehand and setting aside time for people to contribute. Writing down ideas on Post-it notes, for example, can encourage contributions from those who are less comfortable speaking out in larger groups of people.

Tailored listening

Another way to show employees that their contributions are valued is simply to listen respectfully and attentively (Heathfield, 2019). How this is done should be tailored to a team member's personality: quieter people prefer someone who pauses, listens, and creates a space, while more outspoken people value the opportunity to bring their thoughts to the here and now.

Encourage people to bring their 'whole selves' to work

For people to feel they belong, they must be their authentic selves at work. This means accepting that social workers (like all human beings) are vulnerable and imperfect and will need extra support and compassion from time to time. The importance of leaders 'role modelling' self-care and self-compassion is outlined in the KFP5 Wellbeing. It also helps if leaders role-model humility and ask for help when required.

A shared vision makes all the difference

If social workers find their work meaningful and have a collective sense of purpose, they will feel they belong. Helping people reconnect with why they came into social work in the first place, and how their own values match those of the organisation, can be developed through exercises in Appreciative Inquiry that are outlined in KFP2 Sense of Appreciation.

Box 1.5: Building a secure base through teams

How do we build a sense of trust within a team? And how will we know trust exists within that team?

When people make a mistake, or when they are successful, the collective learning that can be gained from those experiences should be considered and shared. Trust is evident when people readily ask for help, admit to mistakes and skill gaps, and are prepared to disagree with the views of others. You will know trust when you see it: people will proactively help each other, be prepared to show vulnerability, and support each other when there are temporary spikes in workload.

How do we build commitment?

For teams to work effectively, they should be aware of how their role contributes to the mission and vision of the wider organisation (see KFP4 Mission and Vision). In other words, they must be able to see where their contribution fits into the wider endeavour. So, managers at the team level should – preferably with the input of their team – develop a strategy, with goals and objectives, that is explicitly linked to that wider enterprise.

How do we build a culture of shared responsibilities?

Stress is often triggered when people have a lot of responsibility but feel they lack control over how they do their work. Responsibility without authority is an acknowledged source of stress, so engaging the team in considering how problems can be shared and resolved collaboratively can enhance a sense of control. Group supervision is a good way of encouraging this within a social work setting. Opportunities to increase control can be explored using Appreciative Inquiry and World Café approaches (see KFP2 Sense of Appreciation, KFP4 Mission and Vision and KFP5 Wellbeing).

How do we build a team that recognises individual strengths?

An effective team needs a wide range of skills and experience. It's easy to think of social work as individualised practice. Social workers rarely work in pairs or observe the practice of others. Encouraging a culture in which people ask for a second opinion, or for someone to help them do a joint piece of work, will ensure social workers are recognised for their individual skills and strengths, while strengthening the expertise and resilience of the team as a whole.