

Psychological Safety in Practice: A Guidebook for Managers



A Guidebook by: CEO Health + Safety Leadership Network
Written by: Fresh Communications | April 2023

“Managers feel the natural messy humanness that exists in our organizations the most. Becoming a strong, confident manager who can wade through this, feel inspired and continue to inspire and motivate others is a journey. It’s not about perfection, and there is no endpoint.”

— Shelley Pacheco
*VP of People and Culture
Workplace Safety & Prevention Services*





Table of Contents

3	Introduction
5	Embrace Psychological Safety
7	Become an Authentic and Inclusive Leader
11	Foster Resilience and Mental Well-being
16	Nurture Learning and Growth
19	Learn From the Experts
26	Conclusion

“Building strong relationships in trust and open communication has never been more critical. More than ever, people are looking for connections, not just personally but also professionally. They want to feel connected to their boss, colleagues, and organization.”

— **The Ultimate Guide to Middle Management:
What’s Changing, Why It’s Hard, and How to Get Ahead**¹.

The Niagara Institute



¹ Niagara Institute, *The Ultimate Guide to Middle Management: What’s Changing, Why It’s Hard, and How to Get Ahead*. Retrieved from: <https://www.niagarainstitute.com/middle-management>



Introduction

If you spend a few moments reviewing managerial job descriptions on any given career site, you'll notice that many dedicate very little space to the role managers play in keeping employees engaged, protecting their health and safety, supporting individual and team growth and development, and fostering a safe environment where all employees feel welcomed and included.

That doesn't mean those expectations don't exist. They're just not typically the focus of most job ads...but they should be.

In today's world of work, managers must operate in the middle of two powerful and sometimes opposing forces – ever-changing organizational goals and priorities and employee expectations. You are held accountable for meeting performance targets, adapting to technological, process and policy changes, all while fostering deeper connections with your team members and supporting their well-being.

On top of the pressures you might have already been feeling, you are faced with managing your own uncertainty while supporting your team and quelling their fears and doubts.

This is a heavy load and it's taking a toll.

Managers and team leaders are three times more likely to develop common mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, and burnout. This is because you typically worry about things like survival of the business and talent retention on top of your daily managerial duties.

It is important to be aware of the potential risk to mental and physical health both to yourself and your team, and act preventatively.

As Shelley Pacheco, VP of People and Culture at Workplace Safety & Prevention Services, noted in this recent **OHS Canada Magazine op-ed**, "Managers feel the natural messy humanness that exists in our organizations the most. Becoming a strong, confident manager who can wade through this, feel inspired and continue to inspire and motivate others is a journey. It's not about perfection, and there is no endpoint."¹

¹ Pacheco, S., [2022], *Don't Just Tell Managers They Are Important to Your Organization: Show Them*, Retrieved from <https://www.ohscanada.com/features/dont-just-tell-managers-they-are-important-to-your-organization-show-them/>

This guide has been written to help you on that journey. It is full of tips, tools, insights, and exercises to help you:

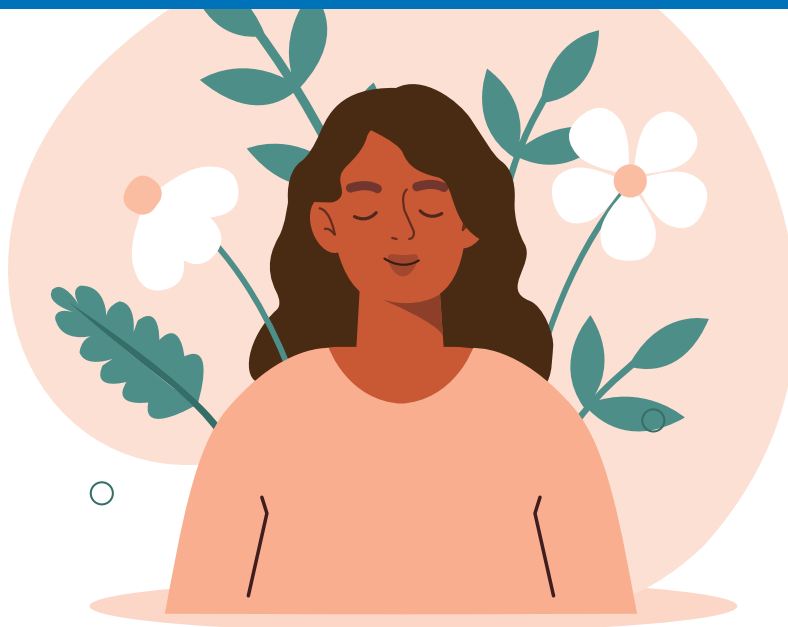
- Become a psychologically safe leader
- Develop the mindset to sustainably handle higher levels of uncertainty and change
- Work optimally to improve employee well-being, and prevent depletion and burnout
- Reduce isolation and create a sense of belonging in the workplace

The exercises included in this guide can be used any time with your team and not necessarily all at once. It is a compilation of:

- *Mental Resilience and Psychological Safety* presentation by Milena Braticevic, PhD Integral Health and founder of Nondual Perspectives
- Excerpts from Trusted Leader Blog posts written by Dr. Bill Howatt, PhD, EdD, and founder of Howatt HR Consulting
- Content from CEO Health + Safety Leadership Network white papers
- External resources

The content is broken into sections so you can read the guide in its entirety or go specifically to topics of interest. At the end of the guide, you'll find real-life scenarios with practical advice from our experts.

Want more tips on creating a culture of health and safety on your team? Check out **The Trusted Leader Blog**, featuring posts on psychological safety, culture, diversity, equity and inclusion, and health and safety culture.



Embrace Psychological Safety

In her book *The Fearless Organization*¹, Amy Edmondson defines psychological safety as, “A belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes, and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking.”

The growth of organizations and individuals is stunted when people don’t feel psychologically safe. If employees feel judged or experience negative consequences for speaking up, they will stop “sticking their necks out” and collaboration, innovation and performance will die on the vine.

In *Valuing the Whole Person*, Katherine Mendoza, Director of Environmental Health and Safety at National Safety Council and Director of The Campbell Institute clarified, “It (psychological safety) is not felt right away. It grows over time. There are stages that groups move through to develop a feeling of psychological safety. When this happens, people feel respected and heard.”

She highlighted that it is not:

- A shield for accountability
- About building consensus
- A personality factor
- A synonym for trust

A psychologically safe workplace is also not free from conflict. However, conflict is managed in a respectful, constructive manner. Check out **5 Myths About Psychological Safety**² for a breakdown of productive vs unproductive conflict.

Your Role in Psychological Safety

The pandemic spurred most of us to re-evaluate our priorities and take a hard look at where we are choosing to invest ourselves. Using this lens, many employees are scrutinizing their employment relationships and are making bold choices to leave or “quietly quit”³—doing only what is required and not applying discretionary effort to their work—when they don’t feel valued or supported.

To reduce this risk and stem the tide of departures, we need to foster psychological safety in our workplaces. And, in your role as manager, you wield a lot of influence in making this happen.

However, before you can create this environment for your team, you must feel psychologically safe yourself. You should expect the same level of safety, connection and support from peers and senior leaders.

“A middle manager’s ability to provide purpose, present empathy, show vulnerability, resolve conflict, and demonstrate humility when they make mistakes, is central to building trusting and productive relationships with employees.”

— **The Ultimate Guide to Middle Management**
Niagara Institute

1 Edmondson, A., [2018] *The Fearless Organization*, John Wiley & Sons.

2 Pedraza, J., [2021] *5 Myths About Psychological Safety*, Diversity Factor, retrieved from: <https://www.diversityfactor.dk/new-blog/5-myths-about-psychological-safety>

3 Nazareth, L., [2022] *Companies can’t afford to ignore ‘quiet quitting’*, Globe and Mail, retrieved from: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/commentary/article-gen-z-quiet-quitting/>

Individual Exercise

How do you measure the degree of psychological safety in your workplace and on your team? Start with the statements below. If you aren't feeling the degree of psychological safety you think you should, check out scenario #3 (on page 24) for tips on how to practice self-care and get the support you need.

	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Disagree
People are able to bring up problems and tough issues.			
No one would deliberately act in a way that undermines someone else's efforts.			
My unique skills and talents are valued and utilized by the organization and my team.			
I feel safe to take risks.			
It is difficult to ask others for help.			
If I make a mistake, it is often held against me.			
I or others feel rejected for being different.			

Team Exercise

Talk to your team about your commitment to psychological safety and invite those who are interested to respond to the statements above. Use the comparison between their responses and yours to begin a conversation toward maintaining, improving, or creating a psychologically safe team environment.



Become an Authentic and Inclusive Leader

It's easy to underestimate your influence in the workplace. However, as a manager, you set the tone with your team, and you have the power to create positive employee experiences by demonstrating your commitment to being authentic and inclusive.

The **Centre for Creative Leadership**¹ describes inclusive leaders as "...individuals who are aware of their own biases and actively seek out and consider different perspectives to inform their decision-making and collaborate more effectively with others. Inclusive leadership also means that leaders commit to ensuring all team members are treated equitably, feel a sense of belonging and value, and have the resources and support they need to achieve their full potential."

Inclusive Leadership in Action

To create a sense of common purpose, belonging and connection, inclusive leaders:

- Create an environment that is safe for open communication about ideas, challenges, concerns, and opportunities.
- Accept that mistakes will be made and focus on learning rather than perfection.
- Appreciate differences, embrace curiosity, and encourage learning from one another.
- Are open to the notion that some things they do can exclude people from feeling valued or equal. They take stock of their blind spots and close them quickly.
- Understand inclusion is defined not by what they think is happening but by employees' perceptions and experiences.
- Are open and create conditions where employees feel safe to share feedback. (See recommended team exercise on page 10.)

Inclusive leaders also understand the importance of emotional well-being. They are aware of emotional responses and practice emotional regulation to create a safe environment.

¹ Centre for Creative Leadership [2023], *Inclusive Leadership: Steps to Get it Right*, retrieved from: <https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/when-inclusive-leadership-goes-wrong-and-how-to-get-it-right/>



Manage Emotions

Emotional regulation is the act of observing and evaluating the quality of thoughts and emotions. You will naturally experience several emotions as the leader of a team. The key is to learn to manage them so that you don't erode trust or diminish team members' feelings of safety and inclusion.

When you feel strong emotions:

- Recognize and identify the emotion: e.g. I feel angry, afraid, sad, frustrated
- Don't dismiss or suppress what you're feeling, but ask yourself:
 - Is this thought/emotion coming from me? Do I believe this? Do I want to feel this way?
 - Is this a part of my conditioning to think or feel this way?

Taking time to step back and think about what you're feeling can be an effective tool for managing emotions in difficult moments.

Build Healthy Connections

Helping employees feel a greater sense of connection can have a direct impact on mental well-being, engagement, retention, productivity, and performance.

Feeling intense loneliness or isolation can make it difficult to regulate emotions. In this state, we can perceive others as critical and unwelcoming, and misread intentions. In fact, loneliness can be as detrimental to our well-being as heart disease.

To avoid this risk:

Be aware – An employee may seem fine but be experiencing intense feelings of loneliness and isolation. If left unresolved, this can negatively affect their experience in the workplace, as well as their overall health. Watch for cues from your team members.

Be open – Talk openly about the importance of social connections to break down fear and stigma around feelings of loneliness and increase the chance that employees seek assistance if needed.

Create a social connection strategy – This takes the burden off the individual to figure out how to forge meaningful connections. It might include regular check-ins and/or mentor or buddy programs. Involve your team in the design of the strategy to ensure it is realistic and they are invested in the outcome.

Leadership behaviours to SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH

These behaviours can be practiced every day to promote and support employees' psychological health.

What is most important is that they are practiced with authentic intention.

Tips for becoming an authentic leader:

- **SEEK HONEST FEEDBACK.** Constantly look for real-time feedback on how others are seeing and experiencing you.
- **REFLECT DAILY ON YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE.** Pause at the end of each day and reflect on things you did well, along with opportunities for improvement.
- **BE CLEAR ABOUT PURPOSE.** Start each day with a clear vision of your purpose and commitments to your people and prioritize them over personal metrics.
- **TAKE TIME TO BUILD AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS.** Get to know your people, what is important to them, what they care about, and how you can support them.

12 DAILY LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS

that can positively impact the overall experience and mental health of employees:

 SHOW YOU VALUE	 SHOW YOU RESPECT	 SUPPORT
<p>WELCOME - make it a point to acknowledge people with intention</p>	<p>RECOGNIZE - talent, competencies and skills</p>	<p>ASK - how you can help</p>
<p>CHECK IN - regularly ask how they are doing</p>	<p>EMPOWER - ask for point of view</p>	<p>PROVIDE ENCOURAGEMENT - praise good work</p>
<p>GRATITUDE - recognize contributions</p>	<p>AUTONOMY - encourage employees to make decisions</p>	<p>SAFE - provide a psychologically safe workplace and create a space where employees feel safe to ask questions</p>
<p>CELEBRATE - acknowledge importance of employees' efforts to organizational success</p>	<p>REWARD - say thank you, and, when appropriate, demonstrate appreciation</p>	<p>PROVIDE OPPORTUNITY - on regular basis share all available training & development opportunities, and support resources.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Do not assume people know.</p>



Team Exercise

Ask team members to circle the number that best captures their experience. Provide a box that they can drop responses into. Let them know their responses are anonymous. You can do this monthly, quarterly or every six months, whatever works best for your team. Let them know that you've received their responses and use aggregated results to discuss what's working well and where improvements are needed.

1. I feel welcomed.



2. I feel like I belong.



3. I feel included in decision making.



4. I feel my opinions are valued.



5. I feel safe expressing my opinion.



6. I feel I am being given a fair opportunity to grow.



“Only when we are in a calm physiological state can we convey cues of safety to another. These opportunities to connect and co-regulate determine the success of relationships, whether professional or personal.”

— Stephen W. Porges,
Author and Psychiatrist

Foster Resilience and Mental Well-being

At the start of the pandemic, **Mental Health Research Canada** began a series of polls to understand the mental health of Canadians. Not surprisingly, their research revealed that anxiety and depression hit an all-time high during the pandemic. While there has been a slight improvement since the first poll was conducted in 2020, their most **recent poll**¹ revealed new factors are affecting the mental health of Canadians.

- Inflation is affecting Canadians with 49% feeling that their mental health is being negatively impacted.
- Just over a third of respondents are worried about not being able to fully pay household bills. Additionally, a third are concerned with their ability to afford to feed themselves and their family with 3% already relying on food support programs.
- A correlation was noted between those who are experiencing very high levels of anxiety and depression and food insecurity (59% and 65%, respectively).

Symptoms of anxiety and depression can be experienced at the following levels:



It is not unusual for us to experience anxiety and depression in the normal to mild range. However, if we experience anxiety or depression at a clinical level, the symptoms can affect everyday life and productivity.

Want more information on promoting mental health and preventing mental harm? Check out the **WSPS Mental Harm Prevention Roadmap Microsite**. It contains free resources and tools, including processes for assessing current state, developing an action plan, and monitoring progress.

¹ National Poll on Canadian Mental Health, <https://www.mhrc.ca/national-polling-covid>

Manage Risk Factors for Anxiety and Depression

It is important to be mindful of the higher-than-normal degrees of anxiety and depression that exist and to take steps to manage risk factors. Lending support doesn't require you to be an expert, you just need to be observant and manage risk factors that are within your control.

How would you and your team members answer these questions?

1. Is my team/organization actively promoting a sense of integration and belonging in the workplace? *(Yes/Somewhat/Not really)*
2. Do we clearly communicate the value of each individual employee to the organization? *(Yes/Somewhat/Not really)*
3. Do we help our employees learn to manage their thoughts and emotions? *(Yes/Somewhat/Not really)*
4. What is the level of worry on my team and in the organization? *(Low/Moderate/High/Unsure)*
5. Does the organization promote a culture of rest and rejuvenation? *(Yes/Somewhat/Not really)*

Mental health is something that we should all proactively manage with the same rigor and diligence that we do physical health. Mental illnesses are diagnosed and require treatment or intervention. According to the **Mental Health Commission of Canada**² 60% of people with a mental health problem or illness won't seek help for fear of being labelled.

As managers, you need to stay up to date on all the resources and supports your workplace offers to employees who are experiencing higher levels of anxiety or depression and talk openly and regularly to make sure your team knows how to access them.

If you or a member of your team is experiencing symptoms consistent with depression, you can use **Beck's Depression Inventory** to assess your state of mind and determine the support you need. It might be that you can build adjustments into your day to address what you're feeling, or you may need to seek professional help.

“Mental Health:
A state of well-being in which every individual realizes [their] own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to [their] community.”

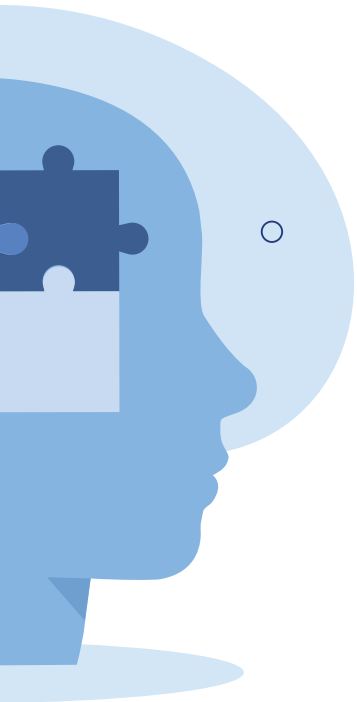
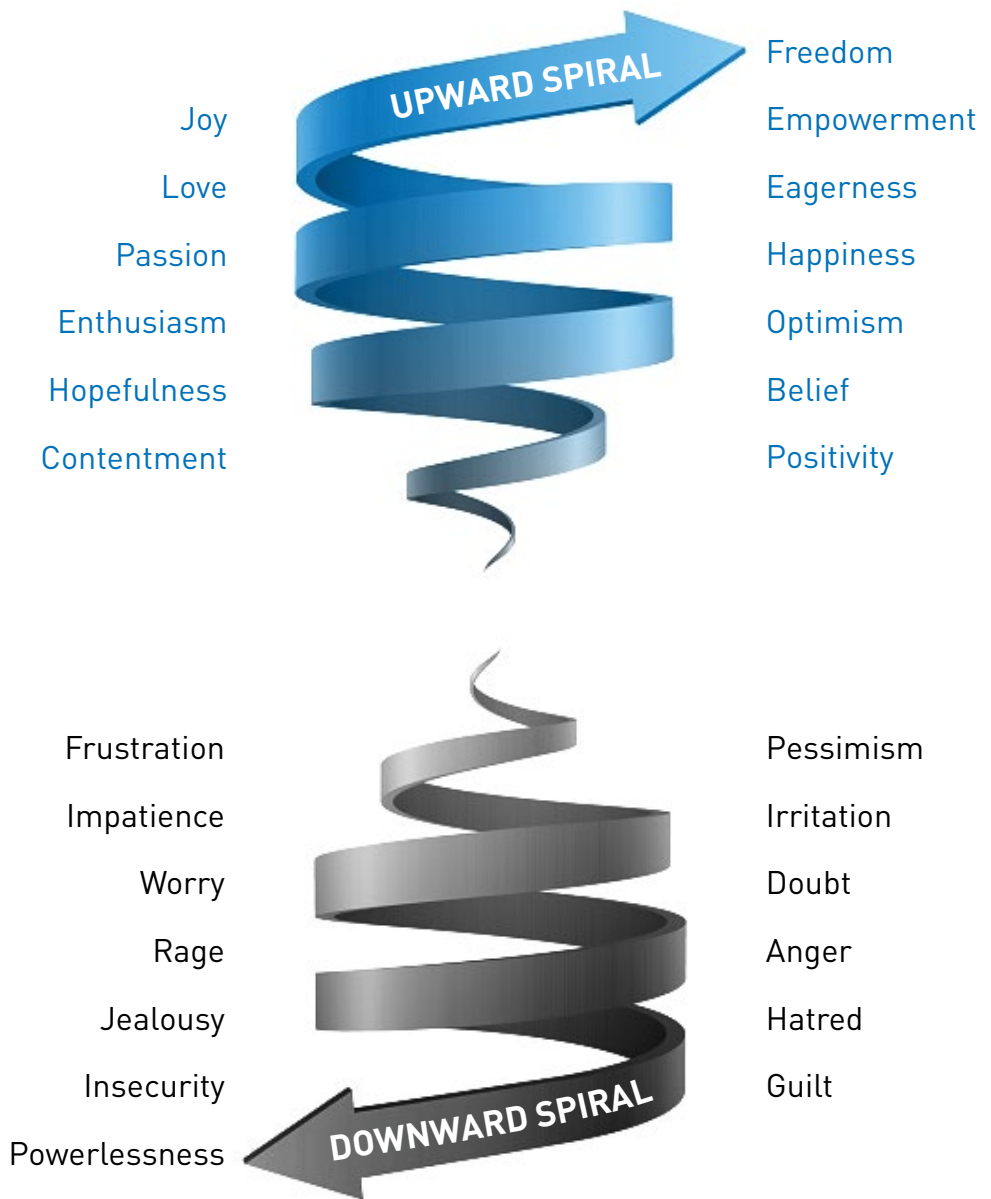
— World Health Organization



² Mental Health Commission of Canada, *Opening Minds*, retrieved from: <https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/opening-minds/#:-:text=60%25%20of%20people%20with%20a, stigma%20related%20to%20mental%20illness.>

Encourage Rest and Rejuvenation

An uncertain work environment can overstimulate the sympathetic nervous system and create chronic stress and burnout. Relatively harmless situations such as a full inbox, looming deadlines, juggling priorities, and managing conflict at work can evoke a fight or flight response, reduce the ability to cope and trigger a downward spiral.



People instinctively turn towards environments that keep them nourished and allow for learning and expansion. In today's workplace where talent retention is increasingly important, creating a culture of relaxation can enhance well-being and long-term success.

You can create this environment for yourself and your team.

Build Resilience

Heart Rate Variability (HRV) is the variation in time between heartbeats. Individuals with high HRV tend to have greater cardiovascular fitness and are more resilient to stress. Those with lower HRV, tend to tire easily and often have cardiovascular issues, reduced cognitive function, anxiety, and depression.

Quick tips on how you and your team members can increase your HRV:

Physical activity – exercise, sports, walking

Stilling the mind – meditation, deep breathing, contemplation

Nutrition – eating nutritious food, avoiding processed food, avoiding toxins

Being outdoors – breathing clean air, drinking clean water, immersing yourself in nature

Flow based activities – dancing, playing music, cooking

Team Activities

When we are relaxed, we are more open to new experiences, learning and collaboration. It is possible for you to build opportunities for rest and rejuvenation into your team activities. Even small measures can go a long way.

- Build a balance hour into your day where employees can minimize distractions and disconnect from email and the phone to recharge without repercussions.
- Organize lunch and learns related to the activities listed above.
- Encourage employees to build a few minutes into their day to quiet their mind with meditation or a flow-based activity.
- Allow for team meetings to occur on the move and/or outdoors – If possible, walk and talk in person or via phone where it is safe to do so.
- Share the energy management exercise on the next page and encourage team members to assess themselves periodically.

Energy Management Questionnaire

This questionnaire is excerpted from the Harvard Business Review Article “**Manage Your Energy Not Your Time**.” Check all that apply and tally your score.

Guide to scores:

- 0 – 3: Excellent energy management skills
- 4 – 6: Reasonable energy management skills
- 7 – 10: Significant energy deficits

BODY

I don't regularly get at least seven to eight hours of sleep, and I often wake up tired.

I frequently skip breakfast, or I settle for something that isn't nutritious.

I don't work out enough.

I don't take regular breaks during the day to truly renew and recharge, or I often eat lunch at my desk, if I eat it at all.

EMOTIONS

I frequently find myself feeling irritable, impatient, or anxious at work, especially when work is demanding.

I don't have enough time with my family and loved ones, and when I'm with them, I'm not always really with them.

I have too little time for the activities I most deeply enjoy.

I don't stop frequently enough to express my appreciation to others or to savor my accomplishments and blessings.

MIND

I have difficulty focusing on one thing at a time, and I am easily distracted during the day, especially by e-mail.

I spend much of my day reacting to immediate crises and demand rather than focusing on activities with longer-term value and high leverage.

I don't take enough time for reflection, strategizing, and creative thinking.

I work in the evenings or on the weekends, and I almost never take an e-mail free vacation.

SPIRIT

I don't spend enough time at work doing what I do best and enjoy most.

There are significant gaps between what I say is most important to me in my life and how I actually allocate my time and energy.

My decisions at work are more often influenced by external demands than by a strong, clear sense of my purpose.

I don't invest enough time and energy in making a positive difference to others in the world.

Nurture Learning and Growth

Taking care of mental health includes developing awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, as well as openness to learning and change that can lead to growth.

Adopting a Growth Mindset

Individuals with a fixed mindset believe abilities can't be changed and tend to worry excessively about setbacks instead of dealing with them directly. They have a distorted view of their abilities and feel insecure, which can lead to higher levels of anxiety and depression.

If you, as a leader, have a fixed mindset, it can cause pressure, intimidation, and competition among team members. They can become so focused on minimizing pain and embarrassment that they won't engage in creative thinking and decision-making.

However, if you adopt a growth mindset and encourage your team to do the same, you can create room for development. Instead of judging and seeking perfection, you can focus on abilities, strengths and weaknesses and help one another learn and grow.

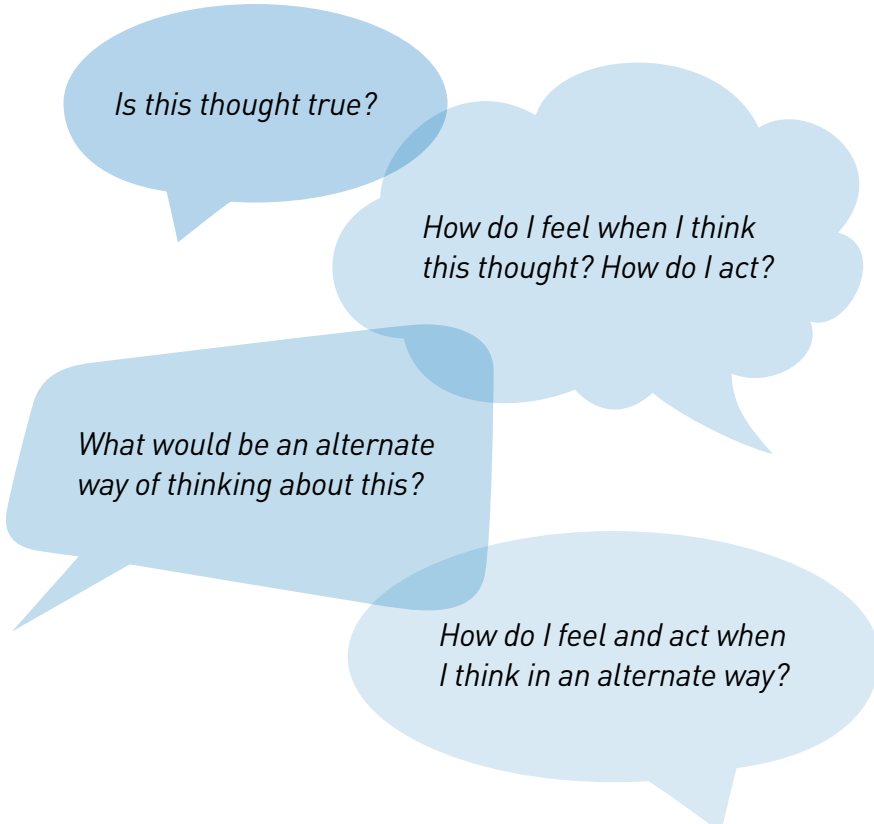
When we do this, we build resilience and can greatly reduce anxiety and depression in ourselves and among team members.





Challenging Our Natural Fixed Mindset

Using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy practices we can challenge fixed thoughts when they arise, by asking ourselves:



Is this thought true?

How do I feel when I think this thought? How do I act?

What would be an alternate way of thinking about this?

How do I feel and act when I think in an alternate way?



Destigmatizing Failure

A growth mindset also helps to bust the stigma around failure. When team members see that you regard mistakes as a natural by-product of experimentation, they will feel less fearful of missteps. And, as they become comfortable learning from their mistakes, they will share their experience with others.

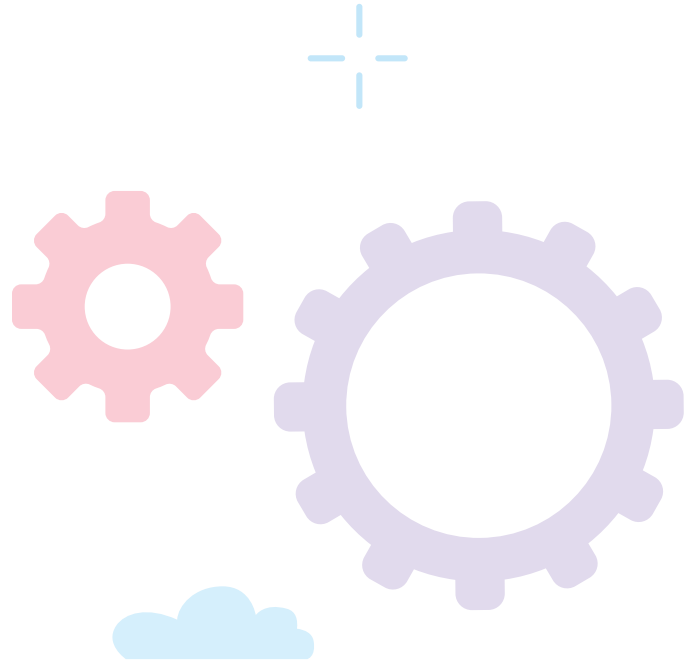
They will be more inclined to take risks and instead of focusing on preventing failure, you can work together to promote fast learning and innovation.

Individual and Team Exercise

To assess whether you feel safe to learn and grow in your role, ask yourself these questions. Encourage team members to ask themselves the same questions. Again, invite them to submit responses anonymously so that you can use findings to reinforce or improve the sense of safety on your team.

Are you very, somewhat, or not comfortable at all with:

- Communicating your goals and achievements.
- Speaking up, volunteering a concern.
- Giving feedback to a colleague.
- Asking a colleague to clarify a particular point.
- Raising a different point of view in a conference call.
- Asking a colleague for feedback on a report.
- Admitting that a project is over budget or behind schedule



“Employees are unlikely to change their behaviors if failure is not an option—instead, they will respond to crises or transformational opportunities by hiding problems that will inevitably arise when trying new things, averting the risks that come with innovation and change, and being afraid to ask questions. Organizations that have cultivated a resilience response emphasize psychological safety (or the idea that taking some personal risks can be OK) and continuous learning. Business leaders in these companies continually ask teams—and themselves—whether they feel as though they have the space to bring up concerns or dissent, whether they fear retribution for mistakes, whether they trust others, and whether they feel valued for their unique skills and talents. Based on the answers to these questions, business leaders can take steps to better support their employees.”

— **Raising the Resilience of Your Organization**¹
McKinsey & Company

¹ Maor, D., Park, M., Weddle, B., [2022] *Raising the Resilience of Your Organization*, McKinsey & Company, retrieved from: <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/raising-the-resilience-of-your-organization>

Learn From the Experts

Below are three scenarios based on real-life examples from managers, like you. Under each one you will find tips and guidance from Milena Braticevic PhD., and Dr. Bill Howatt, PhD, EdD.



Milena Braticevic, PhD Integral Health
Founder, Nondual Perspectives

Milena holds a PhD in Integral Health from the California Institute for Human Science. She currently teaches her programs *Building Mental Resilience in Uncertain Times* and *Psychological Safety* at the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies. Milena's mental health literacy programs have helped individuals at various organizations and educational institutions build resilient minds and reduce the prevalence of common mental disorders and stigma. For more information visit: www.nondualperspectives.com



Dr. Bill Howatt, PhD, EdD
CEO and Founder of Howatt HR Consulting

Bill is the former Chief of Research at the Conference Board of Canada and former Chief of Research and Development at Lifeworks. He is a regular contributor to The Trusted Leader Blog, Talent Canada, OHS Magazine, and the Chronicle Herald, and has published over 350 articles with The Globe and Mail. He has published over 50 books, such as The Globe and Mail bestseller, *The Cure for Loneliness*, and *Stop Hiding and Start Living*. For more information visit: <https://billhowatt.com/>



Scenario #1

A manager whose style is one of calm and reassurance has a strong team that trusts them and works cohesively and collaboratively. The team is achieving objectives and performing well. However, the organization is in chaos. Many teams are not as organized. The leadership team is constantly shifting focus. The manager absorbs a lot for the team, but it's taking a toll. What advice would you offer to this manager to help them protect their own mental health and that of their team?



Milena Braticevic
"Self-care is critical"

While this manager seems to have things under control within their own team, constant change and focus shifting from the leadership can make work exceedingly difficult.

If people on this team are highly conscientious, they will want to do a good job and achieve desired results. Constant shifting focus can make team members feel like they are being set-up for failure, which can quickly result in reduced morale, depletion, and people leaving their jobs.

This manager can start monitoring their energy levels and introduce effective ways to recharge daily at the level of body, mind, emotions, and spirit.

They can recharge the body through proper nutrition and physical activity, and can mentally recuperate by removing distractions and taking some time daily for rest and deep relaxation.

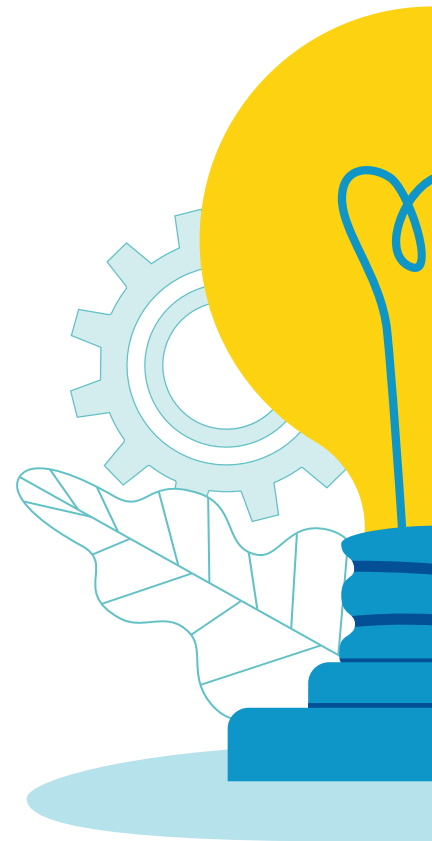
Emotionally, energy can be renewed through supportive relationships and ensuring quality time with friends and family. Spiritually it can be renewed by making decisions with a clear sense of purpose instead of being influenced by changing external demands.

To help their team, this manager can communicate to leadership how shifting focus can be detrimental to team members' well-being and ability to deliver results.

Aside from communicating team members' needs, this manager can be vocal about prioritizing mental and physical well-being and preventing burnout.

They can lead by example and openly discuss the importance of rest and rejuvenation. The manager could introduce informal meetings where team members can brainstorm and support one another, so that the manager is not alone in shouldering the burden of organizational uncertainty and change.

Finally, the manager can share their strengths and performance methodologies with the rest of the organization, with the goal of helping leadership and other teams develop their skills to better deal with high levels of uncertainty and change.





Bill Howatt
“Seek out the support you need”

Negative stress is real, if not dealt with, can cause mental harm. Ultimately, in situations with considerable organizational change and chaos, it’s not the stress (events) that define leaders’ success; it is how they react.

This leader should be acknowledged for their social intelligence (ability to stay calm under pressure) and their accomplishments in building a collaborative team.

They have clearly earned the team’s trust and have established a strong foundation as a psychologically safe leader.

This manager should be proactive and focus on managing, if needed, improving their mental fitness (i.e., create space every day to create positive emotions) and charging their batteries.

They may want to first assess whether they feel psychologically safe to speak “truth to power” to raise suggestions about the priorities and approaches they feel would create more structure and calm across the organization.

They might also consider how their team could help them in this situation.

If needed, the manager should (through your EFAP program if you have one) create a plan to protect their mental health if they are struggling and feeling overwhelmed. They should also talk to the team about these supports to ensure they are also caring for themselves.

The manager has a strong relationship with the team. It’s not a sign of weakness to be vulnerable and to ask them for their thoughts on how to get through this difficult time.



Scenario #2

A lower performing team member is struggling at work. The manager is not particularly close to this individual and already has some concerns about the quality of their work. The manager learns that the individual has been diagnosed with a mental disorder and will need accommodation from the organization. How can the manager overcome negativity bias and handle this situation so that both the employee and the organization are protected?



Milena Braticevic
“Boost confidence and bust stigma”

The manager can overcome negativity bias by taking a long-term view and understanding that most people will experience some symptoms of anxiety, depression, or burnout at some point in their lives. They can start by finding out what support systems exist for employees who are struggling and make this information easily accessible.

Identifying the source of team member’s poor performance (such as depression or burnout) can be helpful in establishing a clear path to recovery and determining an optimal way of working in the future.

The manager should work to maintain a growth mindset — believing that the team member’s ability to cope with their mental health challenges and workload can be developed with the right help and tools.

Adopting a process-orientation will ensure this becomes an opportunity for growth, learning, and change, for the organization and the manager in terms of learning how to handle employee mental health needs, and for the team member who is experiencing mental health challenges.

Another step is to engage in ‘nonviolent communication’ where the manager communicates the needs of the organization and listens to the needs of the team member.

Together, the employee and manager can work to establish a more manageable workload and flexible work structure to help the return to work.

Finally, providing the necessary mental health education and skills training can help prevent relapse and serve to improve the overall well-being of the team and the individual’s ability to achieve higher productivity and more sustainable well-being in the future.





Bill Howatt

“Accept that you play an important role in employees’ well-being”

It is important to remember that it is the manager’s responsibility to care for their employees’ well-being and understand that workers with mental illnesses are protected under human rights legislation.

That said, many leaders have not been trained and struggle with this responsibility. With the right mindset, this manager can learn how to support and protect this worker and others with mental illness in the workplace.

The first step is to be aware of implicit bias and stigma and how they can negatively impact employees’ experiences in the workplace.

If these mindsets are not managed, employees will be discouraged from asking for help and won’t feel safe coming to work.

If the manager is not sure how to support an employee with mental illness, they can work with HR to understand their role and receive training if it is available.

Training will also equip them to support workers who have not come forward with a mental illness but may also be struggling to fulfill their assigned work.



Scenario #3

A manager accepted a promotion that was awarded because the individual possessed exceptional technical skills and expertise. However, they've never felt comfortable managing people and it is affecting their mental health. They are under tremendous stress and feel burned out and the manager knows the team is noticing. However, the manager isn't sure how leaders will respond if they share how they're feeling, and fears that the team will consider them weak if they catch wind of this. What tips would you provide to this manager to help them navigate the situation and protect their mental health?



Milena Braticevic

“Adopt a growth mindset and be compassionate with yourself”

In the process of professional development, it is common to find ourselves in new roles where we need to learn new skills. The manager doesn't yet feel comfortable managing people, and the added pressure of such a complex task can be overwhelming.

In this situation, it would be useful for them to reflect if they have a fixed mindset – do they believe that their abilities are fixed, and that they are simply not good at managing people? Believing their abilities are fixed can increase rumination and worry about setbacks, thereby increasing anxiety and risk of burnout.

With a growth mindset, the manager will have more compassion for themselves and allow time to learn new management skills.

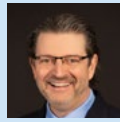
Seeing oneself as someone who is going through a process of development and change can help take the pressure off and reduce worry about being judged.

Instead of looking at the team and leadership as adversaries, the manager can try to see them as collaborators, and ask for the necessary support during the transitional process.

If possible, the manager should seek a mentor, someone who has experience in managing people.

Also, becoming aware of their thoughts and emotions, and managing the tendency to worry about what other people think, can become a valuable skill at this time.





Bill Howatt
“Honest and open conversation is key”

It is a common practice for many organizations to promote individuals with excellent technical knowledge and skills. However, too often, they do not evaluate whether the individual enjoys working with people or has the interpersonal skills needed for the role.

The ability to support employees’ emotional well-being is not a nice-to-have skill set to be a successful in the future of work – it is a must-have skill. Organizations should be asking, “Do you like working with people and caring for their needs?”

And it is just as important for individuals to be honest if they don’t want the role.

If they do want a management position, but are challenged with the transition, the manager should talk to their leader about their developmental needs and feelings and fears.

They can then work together to create a development plan for interpersonal skills and perhaps establish a mentor opportunity.

The manager should develop self-care skills to protect their mental health, including developing coping skills, setting boundaries and self-advocating.

They can control stress and time spent in fight-or-flight mode by acknowledging what they can and cannot control and building awareness of how their skills and behaviour can positively or negatively impact the team.



Conclusion

While many are still learning, a growing number of organizations are recognizing the importance of creating healthier and safer environments where managers and teams flourish. They are investing time and resources in creating a culture of health and safety because they know that discerning employees do not want to work for employers that don't care about their health, safety, and wellbeing, and because it is critical to the bottom line.

Research from McKinsey & Company¹, conducted during COVID, revealed that "... businesses exhibiting healthy, resilient behaviors – such as knowledge sharing, performance reviews, and bottom-up innovation – were less likely than 'unhealthy' organizations to go bankrupt during the following two years."

Even if your organization isn't there yet, or is just starting out on the journey, you have an opportunity to be a catalyst for change. Not only to protect your own psychological safety, but to set an example for your team and others in the organization.

¹ Maor, D., Park, M., Weddle, B., [2022] *Raising the Resilience of Your Organization*, McKinsey & Company, retrieved from: <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/raising-the-resilience-of-your-organization>

“Be the change you want to see in the world.”

— Mahatma Gandhi





Let's Shape the Future of
Health and Safety Together

CEOHSNetwork@WSPS.ca

Workplace Safety & Prevention Services™ is the largest health and safety association in Ontario, responsible for more than 174,000 member firms across the agricultural, manufacturing and service sectors.

CONNECT
WITH US



5110 Creekbank Road
Mississauga, ON L4W 0A1
1 877 494 WSPS (9777)
T 905 614 1400 | F 905 614 1414
E customercare@wsp.ca
WSPS.CA

