

Psych injury risks peak in first three months of change

Thursday, 09 February 2023 2:49pm

Many claims for workplace psych injuries come within three months of change, but this period can become a 'starting point' for mitigating risks, a trauma prevention strategist says.

"All new situations activate a level of anxiety in people, and while small levels of anxiety are needed to produce positive actions, too much can be overwhelming," says **Kerry Howard** in her book, [How to Heal a Workplace](#).

It's well known that psychological injuries result in the longest time off work and are the [costliest claims](#), yet organisations often neglect mitigating the risks early on because they "balk at the idea of speaking openly about how they will handle potentially negative events in the future", Howard says.

"It's as if by talking about it, we will manifest it."

But mitigating risks can be "as simple as setting expectations".

"When we discuss obligations under 'employee wellbeing', the employee feels more valued by the employer, and will be open to employer approaches when they become ill for any reason," says Howard.

In general, people do not resist something "when [they] know about it", so when expectations of the approach are set before it is required, employees will be more welcoming of them, she explains.

Onboarding risks

While numerous situations can put employees at risk of psychological harm, the change that comes from recruiting new staff is "a great starting point to explore reducing the risk", Howard says.

"Too often we recruit into already overwhelmed working environments where we throw a new employee into the deep end and expect them to 'sink or swim'," she explains.

Inducting new employees in a "consistent and replicable manner", not only helps them to understand their role and deliverables, but also ensures they know who to approach when they have questions.

"[T]hat contact person needs to be carefully selected to ensure that they make the new employee feel supported," she says.

Onboarding also requires clear and consistent documentation that clearly explains how the quality of work is established, rather than assessed.

"When we utilise the assessment approach, it appears personal, so setting parameters that can be benchmarked to determine quality is important," Howard says.

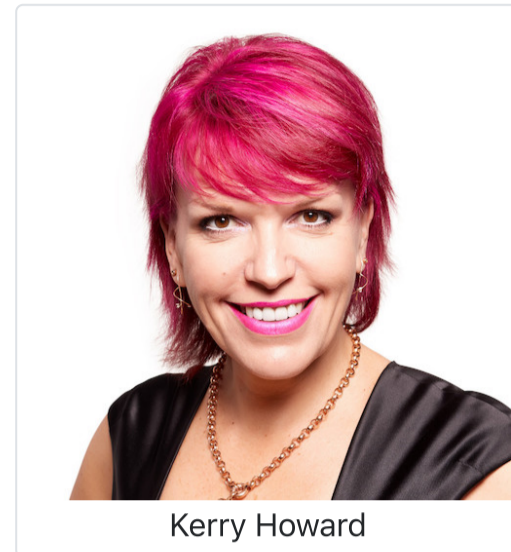
"The less personal assessment that we overlay onto a role, the less likely we are to have a perception issue that feels 'personal'," she adds.

When working with organisations in crisis, Howard assesses standard operating procedures "very early in the project" as this often "provides a quick win in terms of identifying some of the simplest hazards".

A fundamental error

Meanwhile the most fundamental error new leaders make is failing to take time to get to know their people, Howard says.

She notes that new leaders invariably alter the dynamics of their team, and says they need to build camaraderie, empowering their people by recognising their talents or enabling them to build new skills. "Failure to do this has a very negative effect on the culture," she warns.



Kerry Howard

The next step is to ensure concerns are "dealt with as a priority" because when an employee raises an issue to senior leadership, "they are usually close to breaking point and will soon be on stress leave if they don't feel heard".

It's important to understand "just how much effort it takes to raise a concern to a higher authority", she says.

"This is likely to be the only opportunity that you have to mediate a resolution around the issue, and at this point there is no issue that is too small to be validated."

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