

Impacting Safe and Supportive Work Culture in Mental Health Organizations



Creating a safe and supportive work environment is a well-known practice of risk mitigation in organizations. Safety practices were once taken primarily out of concern for workers in fields, where physical items in the work environment, like an electric line or the tools used to repair the line, posed a risk of harm to the employee. A focus on safety pervaded manufacturing, construction, aviation, medical, and health-related industries. A focus on safety pervaded manufacturing, construction, aviation, medical, and health-related industries. They continue to concentrate their efforts on ensuring all individuals are safe from risks of harm and danger. Legislative mandates influence all industries and provide guidance on safety-related matters. It is obvious that safety is important to ensure people, regardless of role and function, can be productive and effective at work while meeting the needs of the communities they serve.

Productive workplaces are safe workplaces

As important as the practice of creating a safe and supportive work environment is in US-based organizations, there remains a challenge. That challenge is not solely assuring an employee's physical safety, but their emotional safety as well. Safety practices, viewed through the lens of emotional wellness, require us to examine the impact of workplace culture, leadership, corporate values, and service on the people who perform the work. Successful teams incorporate all areas of wellness in the design and implementation of services.

Aligning our values with our practice

Team values act as a guide for all other programs, products, and projects within an organization. This focus on values and values clarification is esteemed as an ongoing process of personal and organizational exploration, review, change, and growth. Successful organizations revisit team values annually. The efforts to create cultural values that support practice require candid perspective sharing, mutual respect and accountability, and a willingness to encourage the voices of all team members. This activity is not relegated to one meeting or an email. It is important to labor on the values communicated to the community and ensure the team remains committed to them. Organizations with a positive work environment encourage staff members to speak openly and honestly. This communication ensures that what's shared in writing is supported by the team, aligns with best practices, and meets individual needs.

Promoting mindfulness and compassion

The changing landscape of mental health services requires employees to reflect on their own needs, strengths, and challenges. Employers are also required to support employees as they navigate stressful, potentially painful experiences. Successful teams offer guidance, support, and assistance to each other. Leader-sponsored and supported activities promote emotional wellness and confirm this exploration is acceptable at work.

Safe workspaces foster innovation

Mental health organizations provide services and create products that make an impact in the community. This requires expertise, talent, solid teamwork, and a willingness to be innovative. Innovation breeds new products, approaches to the work, and collaborations. Successful teams use weekly meetings, lunch and learns, surveys, and other thought-sharing activities to create products or processes. Successful leaders encourage the exploration of new ways to present work, remain authentic, and promote equitable outcomes for staff. Role and function do not impact who can participate in project and product development. Silos are discouraged. Positive work environments encourage employees to share their viewpoints without fear they have no frame of reference, skill, or acumen to assist in the co-creation of new and existing work products.

Safe workspaces avoid re-traumatization

Work in the mental health field can be difficult. It can affect employees' physical, emotional, and mental health. Transparent discussions communicate comfort and support. Changes are also opportunities to explore transitions, discuss new plans of action, and conduct needed follow-up activities with employees. Successful teams have individual, group, and subgroup meetings to discuss issues that arise and their impact on employee functioning.

Safe workspaces promote healthy relationships

Regular contact with colleagues and commitment to team-created values foster healthy interactions with colleagues. Supportive work environments encourage employees to participate in activities with each other and collaborate. Individual and team successes are acknowledged and celebrated. Sincere expressions of gratitude are a daily and weekly practice, facilitated in both informal and formal settings.

Safe workspaces embrace imperfection

Intention aside, there are moments in an organization when mistakes occur. It could be the session that didn't land as we anticipated or the project that was not well received. These disappointing moments can be met with ill feelings or teams can embrace the reality that all work products are delivered with sincerity and humility. Safe work environments acknowledge people as well as products. Supportive teams foster collective ownership of practices that go well and those that need extra attention or help.

Safe workspaces model equitable practices

A team working to create a safe workspace addresses issues of equity and inclusion in its daily operations, as well as its community-facing work products. Equity and inclusion work supports ongoing growth and development. It gives staff members a voice in places we may not traditionally venture.