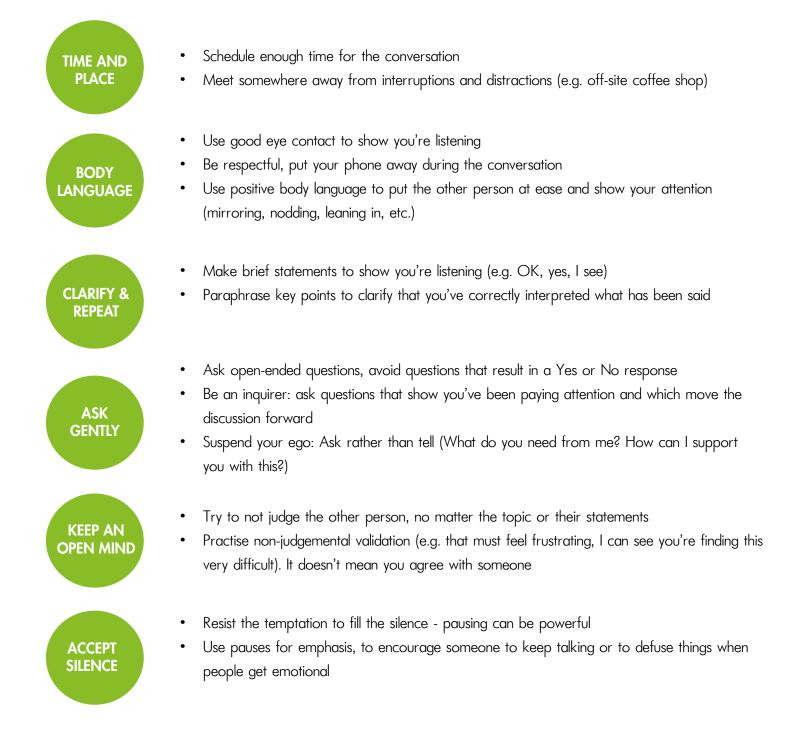# BUILDING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE WORKPLACE: TOP TIPS FOR MANAGERS

1. **Practice active listening**
2. **Create structured opportunities for sharing (weekly Team Check-In)**
3. **Demonstrate vulnerability (share your own stresses, personal commitments during the Check-In)**
4. **Give team members regular constructive feedback**

1. SIX STEPS TO ACTIVE LISTENING

TIME AND PLACE
- Schedule enough time for the conversation
- Meet somewhere away from interruptions and distractions (e.g. off-site coffee shop)

BODY LANGUAGE
- Use good eye contact to show you're listening
- Be respectful, put your phone away during the conversation
- Use positive body language to put the other person at ease and show your attention (mirroring, nodding, leaning in, etc.)

CLARIFY & REPEAT
- Make brief statements to show you're listening (e.g. OK, yes, I see)
- Paraphrase key points to clarify that you've correctly interpreted what has been said

ASK GENTLY
- Ask open-ended questions, avoid questions that result in a Yes or No response
- Be an inquirer: ask questions that show you've been paying attention and which move the discussion forward
- Suspend your ego: Ask rather than tell (What do you need from me? How can I support you with this?)

KEEP AN OPEN MIND
- Try to not judge the other person, no matter the topic or their statements
- Practise non-judgemental validation (e.g. that must feel frustrating, I can see you're finding this very difficult). It doesn't mean you agree with someone

ACCEPT SILENCE
- Resist the temptation to fill the silence - pausing can be powerful
- Use pauses for emphasis, to encourage someone to keep talking or to defuse things when people get emotional

2. START TEAM MEETINGS WITH A CHECK-IN

Including a Check-In as part of your weekly team meetings gives an opportunity to find out how individuals are doing, uncover any concerns or potential hurdles for the week ahead and shows your team members that they are welcome to share. Together as a team you can explore solutions to any challenges. It is not only on you as the manager to find the solution and take on the extra burden or work if your team members are feeling overloaded. Having visibility on challenges that the team are facing will help you to plan and prioritize, and it also gives team members the opportunity to support each other and come up with creative solutions.

TEAM CHECK-IN

Leave enough time for each person (at least 2 minutes) to share at the start of the weekly meeting. Each person to comment on:

- How are you feeling about the upcoming week?

- Are there any potential stressors that the team can help with?

- Is your workload manageable?

- Are you getting enough time for self-care?

- Can use a 1-5 rating, red-amber-green system or weather metaphors (rainy, sunny, grey, stormy) to express how each person is feeling.

Lead by example: share first and set the tone. Show that it's OK to be Red and it's OK to ask for help. Role-model Active Listening to show your engagement with each person speaking (see above)

3. DEMONSTRATE VULNERABILITY

Team members can be unsure of their leaders until it's proven that there is no need to be. The fastest way to gain the trust of your team is to be honest and authentic in your leadership. As a manager, it's OK to let your team know about some of your personal struggles. Start with something small. Talking about your challenges will remind your team that you are human and have struggles with aspects of your role and personal life.

Vulnerable leadership encourages transparency and builds empathy in the workplace. As a manager there may be times when you're unsure of the next move to make. At these times, let others on your team lead in their strengths. This shows that you are a secure leader, able to give others on your team the opportunity to shine where they are strongest, and so build more cohesion and loyalty among team members.

A display of vulnerability by the leader encourages team members to also take risks by being vulnerable. This improves communication, productivity, and relationships among team members. We all want to see that our leaders care about us and to be led by people who are open to learning, sharing and providing us with the space to grow and develop.

4. GIVE TEAM MEMBERS REGULAR CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

Providing feedback is key to letting your employees know how they're performing and what's expected of them, as well as supporting your team's learning and development. It's important this feedback happens on a regular, on-going basis - not just when performance reviews come around.

Be problem-focused and specific

Part of telling a team member what they can do better is to tell them why. The person may not have all the background or context on an issue. Tell them how the issue affects you, the team and the company. The more specific you make your feedback, the more actionable it will be.

Talk about the situation, not the individual

To stay constructive, focus on the outcomes and impartial observations, don't include the individual's personal attributes which could be taken as a personal attack. By discussing the situation itself, and sticking to the objective facts, you show you're most concerned about fixing the problem at hand and not criticising the team member.

Give praise where it's due

Giving positive feedback is also essential. Celebrate the wins for an individual and for the team when significant milestones have been achieved. You can also acknowledge positives when giving feedback on aspects of performance that need attention. This helps to reassure the team member that you have the full picture of their work performance and that it is only a portion of this that needs to be addressed.

Be direct but informal

It's best to deliver feedback in-person, in a quiet space where you can have an honest and informal one-to-one chat. If that's not possible, a video call can also work. Avoid email or text to relay your feedback as this can lead to misinterpretation and may trivialise the feedback. While you want to be informal, it's best to get directly to the point of your discussion for feedback to be most effective.

Be sincere

Ensure your tone and manner of delivery match the context of the feedback you're providing. If the feedback is positive, let your emotions show that you appreciate the individuals efforts and celebrate their achievement. For negative feedback, a more concerned tone will show you believe the problem should be taken seriously. Most importantly, avoid emotions such as anger, sarcasm or disappointment.

Listen

When giving constructive feedback, make sure the team member has the opportunity to respond. It should be a conversation between you both so it's important to show that you're prepared to listen to their concerns and their interpretation of events. It's also an opportunity for the team member to express their ideas to you and contribute to the solution.

Make it timely

It's best to give praise when the team member's achievement is recent. This is also important for negative feedback - except in a situation where their performance has brought up strong emotions for you. In this case, it is wise to wait until you've 'cooled off' before taking it up with them. This will help to ensure that your feedback is objective and not coloured by emotion.

We all thrive on positive reinforcement, so don't assume your team will know when they're performing well - come out and tell them. Be it positive or negative, providing staff with on-going feedback is one of the most important and powerful team building skills you can develop.

As managers you are in a unique position to create an environment where it is safe for team members to seek support and to contribute fully to the teams success.

- Check in regularly with your team members

- Have conversations - about their work and how they're managing their workload

- Identify the way forward together, be willing to ask for input from team members to develop solutions

FURTHER RESOURCES

Harvard Business Review: What is Psychological Safety?

McKinsey: The Importance of Psychological Safety in the Workplace

Center for Creative Leadership: How Leaders Can Build Psychologically Safe Workplaces

World Economic Forum: How Do We Create a Team Culture That's Inclusive and Psychologically Safe?

Ashurst: Psychosocial and Psychological Risks in the Workplace Report

Boston Consulting Group: Psychological Safety Levels the Playing Field for Employees

Virgin Pulse: Guide to Psychosocial Safety at Work

2024 EY US LGBTQ+ Workplace Barometer

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The City Mental Health Alliance Hong Kong (CMHA HK) is a not-for-profit membership organisation. We are an alliance of businesses, working together with mental health experts and partner organisations, to achieve our vision that every workplace will protect, support and create positive mental health for their people.

We provide training, events, resources, research and practical support for companies wishing to create mentally healthy workplaces.

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