

EMPLOYEE WELFARE: DEVELOPING CHANGE STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS EMPATHY BURNOUT IN CARING PROFESSIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The general health and wellbeing of an organisation's workforce, also referred to as employee welfare, remains a crucial component in organisational and leadership planning. At the level of an individual, welfare is often related to one's level of satisfaction, engagement and dedication. At the organisational level, welfare can be associated with productivity, turnover, and employee relationships. An employee's welfare, particularly in a caring profession, is often subject to the emotionally demanding needs of their patients, which significantly affects their ability to remain empathic and compassionate towards others, and themselves. Empathy, like any emotional resource, can be exhausted if not replenished often. Compassion fatigue, also known as empathy burnout, is an emotional state experienced by those working in emotionally demanding roles, such as healthcare professionals, police service and social workers. The common symptoms of empathy burnout include depression, anxiety, absenteeism and lethargy. At an organisational level, it is imperative that leadership decisions consider the implications of their profession to the wider workforce, and so develop strategies to prevent empathy burnout. This paper explored the perspectives of employee welfare at a local hospital to develop strategies for change that may assist caring professionals in managing their stress and maintaining levels of empathy. From the exploratory research project, strategies emerged that could be actioned to improve employee welfare across the organisation. These strategies for change included strengthening communication lines to eliminate barriers to support, bolstering the existing employee assistance programme, developing resilience training schemes, and closing the gap between executive leadership and staff. Caring professions are positions/roles including but not limited to nursing, clinicians, physicians, paramedics, mental health employee, caregiving, counsellors, physiologists, orderly and welfare officers.

Emotional intelligence research remains an area of interest across industries, particularly in human resources management and the healthcare industry (Kurup & Rishi, 2016). The need for this research originated from the desire of a Health and Safety Manager to understand the current state of employee welfare within their organisation, and explore related benefits available in their workforce. The aim was to understand perspectives of employee welfare at the hospital at the focus of this research, and compare findings between managerial and non-managerial employees. To achieve this aim, a series of semi-structured interviews and quantitative surveys were undertaken with hospital employees including those working in clinical areas, management and administration. Though the sample size of this research was small, the findings revealed a valuable snapshot of employee welfare within the hospital, and and potentially, wider implications.

The questionnaire items that were developed from existing research, assessed three specific themes: employee welfare, empathy burnout, and employee engagement. Initially, the results were indicative of systemic challenges around communication channels and power distance with leadership, further analysis revealed that despite the challenges, employees demonstrated an awareness of others and the ability to identify signs of empathy burnout, particularly in clinical areas. This was indicative of strong collegial support across the departments with a general understanding of the role and its associated risks of burnout. These findings from the survey and semi-structured

interviews were valuable tools in developing potential strategies to evaluate and change processes to better suit the needs of the workforce.

At the focus of the research were employees from the emergency department, human resources, occupational health and safety, and clinical administration. The purpose of collecting samples from these departments was to widen the scope of research and explore and compare perspectives from clinical, administrative, supportive, managerial and non-managerial employees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee welfare

Kurup and Rishi (2016) describe employee welfare as the general health and wellbeing of an organisation's workforce that requires constant focus in organisational decision making and planning. To manage and reduce the risk of burnout and fatigue, Baldschun (2014) suggests welfare-related strategies be implemented at the earliest point of the employee's journey and take a proactive approach to maintaining welfare. Similarly, Robertson and Cooper (2010) discussed a hedonic approach to addressing the psychological welfare of employees. This approach focuses on non-monetary benefits to develop the awareness of mental health and build resilience through positive experiences and strength-based training. As supported by Pawar (2016), improving the psychological welfare of an employee has proven results in the quality of work provided by a 'healthy and happy' employee. In a study exploring the perspectives of childcare workers, Baldschun (2014) found a strong relationship between the welfare of employees and the resulting welfare outcome for patients. For example, a healthcare professional working overtime without adequate rest breaks is likely to provide poor quality of care to their patient (Baldschun, 2014). Further, Robertson and Cooper (2010) and Pierre and Tremblay (2011), argued that managers are responsible for the welfare of their employees and must do all that is practicable to reduce the risk of psychological difficulties that may result in disengagement, empathy burnout and employee turnover. Taking preventative steps such as introducing welfare benefits means managers are empowered to improve the welfare of their workforce (Pierre & Tremblay, 2011; Baldschun, 2014). It is important for leadership to prioritise the needs and interests of employees to improve the health and wellbeing of an organisation's workforce and take practical steps to retain valuable employees. Developing a stronger focus on employee welfare and implementing benefits (such as resilience training, additional sick leave, and basic amenities, positively influences the engagement, satisfaction, quality of work and mental health of a workforce (Robertson and Cooper, 2010).

Empathy burnout

Empathy burnout is described by Hojat (2009) and Johnson (2013) as a type of emotional stress and exhaustion widely experienced by caring professions where high levels of empathy and emotional intelligence are needed. Hofmeyer et al. (2016) describes empathy burnout as "...nurses losing their nurturing ability toward patients, toward colleagues, and toward themselves" (p. 203). Symptoms of empathy burnout may include depression, anxiety, irritability, apathy and physical fatigue (Gill, Schaddelee, Ramsey, Turner & Naylor, 2018).

Within the context of a hospital setting, factors such as high caseloads, time pressures and unfavourable working conditions may negatively influence an individual's capacity to be compassionate and empathetic towards their patients, and themselves (Kliener & Wallace, 2017). Employees that work in high-stress environments, particularly with vulnerable clients and/or customers, are predisposed to experiencing multiple types of burnout (Gill, et al., 2018). For managers to reduce the risk of their employees experiencing empathy burnout Kliener and Wallace (2017) suggest engaging employees in self-care and self-awareness education practices to increase their resilience, raise awareness of empathy burnout, and better equip employees to manage their own stress and reduce their

risk of burnout. Schwerman and Stellmacher (2012) stated improving the support of colleagues and increasing the quality of communication at all levels of an organisation enables employees to share their experiences with others in similar work environments. Furthermore, Thompson (2013) found that providing employees with an opportunity to share with others – particularly those in caring professions – reminds them of why they entered the profession and gives them a renewed sense of value and compassion to carry into their work.

Employee engagement

An emerging phenomenon and current 'buzzword' in business and psychology literature is Employee Engagement (EE). This is a term that has generated significant interest in the business and human resources community (Zhang, Avery, Bergsteiner & More, 2014; Ünal & Turgut, 2015; Iqbal, Shabbir, Zameer, Khan, & Sandhu, 2017). Zhang et al. (2014) describes EE as, "a heightened emotional and intellectual connection that an employee has for their job, organisation, manager, or co-employees that, in turn, influences their ability to apply additional discretionary effort to their work" (p. 271). Gupta (2015) found that EE could be a tool used to measure the degree to which employees are involved in decision-making and organisational development, instead of completing their assigned roles without the opportunity to influence decisions and planning. Zhang et al. (2014) noted that EE is associated with positively influencing employee turnover, satisfaction, productivity, performance and absenteeism. Similarly, Bakker, Albrecht and Leiter (2011) found that employees that experience high levels of engagement exhibit attentiveness in their work, improved attention to detail, and as a result, their quality of work. Organisations that adopt a programme to assist planning and implementation of employee engagement strategies see an increase in employee satisfaction, trust and dedication (Bakker, et al., 2011). According to Gupta (2015) to improve EE, there must be a significant focus on encouraging employees to become involved in decision-making, creativity, innovation, educational opportunities and communication. Thus, managers are likely to experience an increase in emotional and intellectual commitment from their employees (Iqbal, et al., 2017). The advantage of an engaged and committed workforce is that it provides management with another valuable resource for decision-making and planning processes, as employees are encouraged to become involved at different levels of an organisation (Iqbal, et al., 2017; Ünal & Turgut, 2015).

Fully engaged employees who are energetic and enthusiastic are more predisposed to perform Discretionary Service Behaviours (DSB) for their colleagues and organisation (McShane, Olekalns & Travaglione, 2013; Selander, 2015). Similar to organisational citizenship, McShane et al. (2013) describe DSBs as the degree to which an employee feels emotionally connected to an organisation and feels the desire to assist customers and colleagues beyond their normal requirements. In contrast with Bhaskar and Khera (2014), Salwendar (2015) described DSBs as the positive and negative intent to perform outside their explicit job descriptions, including, and not limited to bending the rules or violating procedures for customer satisfaction. Selander (2015) found that employees who are fully engaged are likely to over-work, lose track of time and sacrifice their own well-being for the sake of others. Though employees whom are proud and dedicated to their work, employees performing DSB's are likely to experience burnout if working overtime becomes the 'norm'.

Though employee engagement can be positive for an organisation, Selander (2015) argues that managers must take practicable steps to ensure a sustainable level of engagement where the concepts of vigour, dedication and absorption are reflected. Managers that invest time and resources in EE see a positive increase in employee satisfaction, dedication and emotional connection to their work. However, there must be a balance between what is sustainable and realistic for employees (vigour, dedication and absorption), and avoid narrow approaches to engagement where the needs of the organisation are above those of employees (Bhaskar & Khera, 2014).

RESEARCH METHODS

To compare perspectives of employee welfare, the research comprised of two methods: semi-structured interviews and an electronic survey.

Survey

The survey questions were formulated from existing research found in the literature and prior research undertaken by the hospital. The questionnaire aimed to assess the themes described in the literature review: employee welfare, empathy burnout and employee engagement. To minimise maturation effects on respondents, a maximum of twenty-five closed-ended questions was allowed, with an expected duration of ten minutes (Mauceri, 2016).

Of the twenty-five questionnaire items included in the survey, five questions measured demographics; four questions measured respondents' knowledge and use of the organisation's welfare-related benefits; five questions related to each literature theme; and one question asked the respondent to write additional comments relating to their perspectives of employee welfare. As described by Mauceri (2016), the respondents were asked to rate their answer on a Likert Scale containing 5 items; strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; and strongly agree. The Likert Scale enabled the researcher to find the average answers among respondents, and draw clear comparisons between data sets (Mauceri, 2016).

At the focus of the survey was non-managerial employees in the emergency department and the clinical records department with a collective sample size of 115. The purpose of using these departments was to gather clinical and non-clinical employee perspectives of welfare to later compare with the interview results. Of the 115 email invitations distributed, 64 (r.r: 56%) surveys were returned. Due to concerns of reliability and validity, four responses were removed from the sample ($n=60$) recorded.

Interview

As described by Niedzwiecki and Nunnally (2017), the researcher followed a semi-structured format where the questions were prepared before the interview and the interviewee was asked to answer open-ended questions specific to the research topic. The interviews were undertaken to collect data from Human Resources (HR) and occupational Health and Safety (OHS) managers, where they were asked ten questions relating to their perspectives of employee welfare-related policies and processes.

The interview questions were formulated from existing literature research and prior research undertaken by the organisation. The interview questions aimed to assess the literature themes described in the literature review. To minimise maturation effects on interviewee responses, the interview was kept to a maximum of ten questions. Of those ten questions, five reflected employee welfare; two questions measured compassion fatigue; two questions measured employee engagement; and one question provided the interviewee the opportunity to comment.

Approximately six HR and four OHS personnel were invited to participate in the interviews. The maximum duration of the interviews was 30 minutes and interviewees had the opportunity to opt out or ask any questions before the interview. Of the ten potential interviewees, nine accepted the invitation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To identify themes in the results, a comparative analysis was undertaken to assess the differences and similarities in responses from survey respondents and interviewees. The predominant themes that emerged from the research findings were self-awareness, communication and leadership. The employee assistance programme is also discussed as it was a common theme among the interviewees.

Self-awareness

Self-awareness was evident in many survey respondents (60%, $n=36$) where they said they feel confident in managing their personal work-related stress and fatigue. Miksch, Lindeman and Varghese (2015) defined self-awareness as the degree to which an individual is aware of their own cognitive function and emotional processes. Timmins (2011) described self-awareness as “a continuous and evolving process of getting to know who you are” (p. 33). Survey respondents (64%, $n=38$) also demonstrated self-awareness when asked if they are adequately equipped to identify symptoms of stress and/or fatigue, which indicates a perceived awareness of one’s cognitive and emotional processes. Hölzel, Lazar, Gard, Schuman-Olivier, Vago, and Ott (2011) state that individuals with high self-awareness are likely to identify emotional stress in others. It is reassuring that over two thirds of the survey respondents (70%, $n=42$) said they felt confident in identifying emotional stress in others. Just under half of the survey respondents (45%, $n=27$) said they would talk to someone when they are struggling with their workload. While respondents showed self-awareness of their stress, they said they were much less likely to ask for help, or recognise their high workload until they were stressed, and so their ability to identify when they are struggling may be limited. Griffith and West (2013) noted that self-aware individuals are likely to approach someone when they are struggling with difficult situations or tasks. However, Hofmeyer et al. (2016) stated that healthcare employees are likely to care for others, regardless of the potential personal cost to themselves. According to Wood et al. (2017) and Engle et al. (2017), healthcare employees are predisposed to experience symptoms of compassion fatigue as they operate in a challenging and complex environment where their primary focus is patient care.

Self-awareness is noted by Wood et al. (2017) as one of the primary traits of a resilient person, as it requires the person to have the ability to focus inward and acknowledge one’s emotions. Interestingly, the survey respondents’ answers to self-awareness seemed to contradict their understanding of their own resilience. From another perspective, survey respondents’ inability to enforce positive change or working conditions might indicate self-awareness and resilience in managing long-term stress. Hofmeyer et al. (2016) argued that leaders’ responsibility of their employees is particularly important in healthcare industries where symptoms of compassion fatigue are prevalent.

Survey respondents that demonstrated high levels of self-awareness of others (88%, $n=53$), and the willingness to help their colleagues (88%, $n=53$), suggests high collegiality or a mutual understanding of the work environment and identified ways to reduce stress. According to Griffith and West (2013), self-aware individuals are likely to show compassion and empathy towards their colleagues, as they become more adept at identifying emotional stress in others. Conversely, Engle, Peterson, McMinn and Taylor-Kemp (2017) found employees that were low in self-awareness experience poorer relationships with their colleagues. If an individual does not understand the emotional stress of others on a cognitive level, they lack the aptitude to identify when a colleague may be struggling. Additionally, Timmins (2011) and Kemerer and Cwiekala-Lewis (2017) argued that self-awareness is vital for developing one’s communication skills and interpersonal relationships.

Communication and leadership

Of the 60 survey respondents, 46% ($n=28$) said it was difficult to speak up if they perceived a problem; although 35% ($n=21$) said they would speak up. This may indicate that employees are aware of their situation, but there are barriers in communication, or they lack the power to change their circumstances. Timmins (2011) and Kang and Sung (2017) argue that effective communication is at the forefront of successful relationships in an organisation,

where trust, transparency and appropriate behaviours that unite employees. According to Zheng, Molineux, Mirshekary and Scarparo (2015) good communication is closely linked with employee welfare as employees are likely to approach their colleagues or leaders with ideas or concerns.

As described by Kang and Sung (2017), and Kemerer and Cwiekala-Lewis (2017), leaders are responsible for ensuring clear lines of communication throughout an organisation, and the resources to manage emotional stress and fatigue as captured in this interviewee’s comment:

The employer loses credibility when they are not transparent. Executive Leadership Team (ETL) are so far removed from employees that they aren’t trusted anymore. You must earn the trust of the employees. Leaders must demonstrate [organisational] values and behaviours.

In relation to the survey findings, 50% of survey respondents ($n=60$) said they do not feel appreciated for the contribution they make. One reason for this may be that employees are receiving limited feedback and are unsure of their place or performance in the organisation. According to Zheng et al. (2015), open and honest feedback enables employees to learn from their mistakes and thrive in their respective industries. Half of the interview participants said they felt underappreciated due to the lack of clear communication or feedback from their leaders. One managerial perspective from the interviews suggested the distance between leadership and employees was a contributing factor to the gap in communication:

Loyalty and respect towards staff is so important. Distance between ELT and staff is huge. ELT should show support - show that they are part of the staff. Approachability visibility and connectivity. Ensure employees are listened to and heard.

Employees said they were aware of their colleagues and felt confident in identifying stress in others. However, the results indicated potential challenges to communication where a mixed response (52%, $n=60$) felt comfortable reporting concerns about others’ safety, while only 53% (of that 52%, $n=60$) said they would report concerns about themselves. One manager said in an interview:

Communication gets lost. Some areas are good, some are not so good. Information is not filtered down from managers to employees. Employees might get a message to managers, but it may get blocked. Messages get lost and just get forgotten or perhaps not seen as a priority.

The link between communication and leadership was established in the survey, where less than half of respondents (43%, $n=60$) said that leaders communicate well, and that employees generally know what is going on. If there is fault in communication, Aas et al. (2008) noted that monitoring and implementation remains the responsibility of leadership (Zhang, et al., 2014; Timmins, 2017). When employees are engaged in the process and given opportunity to communicate openly with leaders, positive increases in welfare, turnover and performance are observed (Zheng, et al., 2015). Many survey respondents (67%, $n=60$) said they felt committed to their work when management encouraged them to contribute to decision-making as this next interview comment suggests:

Internal emails and intranet - good for me when I’m at my computer all day. Not everyone gets a chance to view these emails. I don’t think the communication gets there. Nurses are too busy to see messages, posters and training. TV screens are great, but most information is through emails and Pulse.

Not everyone sees information around the hospital. Not every nurse or doctor gets to see this information as they are so busy and short staffed. According to Celma, Martinez-Garcia and Raya (2018), socially responsible leaders take initiative when implementing communication models, ensuring it addresses the needs of all employees. Models

that are open, versatile, and flexible positively correlated to improving quality of work and employee welfare, as employees felt trusted and valued (Mathews & Crocker, 2016; Celma, et al., 2018).

Employee assistance programmes

The interview findings appeared to be concerned around the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) currently available to employees, and that staff need to know about it. Kurup and Rishi (2016) argued a strong presence of employee welfare activities and benefits increases trust and satisfaction among employees. Additionally, Ganesh (2017) noted that a flow-on affect from such welfare benefits can be observed through positive increases in performance, engagement and development. According to Shapiro, Carlson, Astin and Freedman (2005), communication and transparency are key to building trust in the employee-employer relationship. In the survey, 31% (n= 19) of respondents said they were aware of EAP, and of those respondents only 17% (n=10) had used the service. This was further captured in the interviews:

It is underutilised. Not well communicated. There is a general lack of awareness. I am obliged to refer employees, though I don't think EAP is effective. I don't believe in the service they provide as there is no way to follow up, no reporting whatsoever.

Employees are likely to participate in welfare-related activities if they are made aware of what they are and given an opportunity to contribute to the selection of appropriate activities that addresses their needs (Mathews & Crocker, 2016). Mathews and Crocker (2016) suggest encouraging employee buy-in where they engage at the planning level, and work together to develop activities best suit their needs. As described by one interviewee,

We need more initiatives. Communicated well, and ensure awareness is high. Different things will improve culture in the organisation, and people would hopefully buy into it.

Shapiro et al. (2005) suggest that leaders need to encourage engagement and buy-in from employees, enabling leaders to demonstrate willingness and transparency to follow through with employee requests. As described by Réka and Borza (2012), follow up is a crucial component in effective communication, particularly across diverse organisations. Additionally, Minter (2010) states that seeking feedback is key in improving processes in an organisation. A lack of reporting and followup was reported by an interviewee:

EAP has no current measures, so not sure of its effectiveness. Reports could be useful to see the number of employees that go through.

Although the service provided by EAP is confidential, there is a general understanding by interviewees that there needs to be a follow-up process where managers may assist their employees further. For managers to ensure the effectiveness and availability of resources, Engle et al. (2017) argues that a 'next-step' of seeking feedback is necessary to match support systems with employee needs. As one interviewee stated:

Often, we don't know anything. It is a confidential service. Lack of reporting metrics (EAP) means we don't know how else to support them if we don't know. Employees don't necessarily tell us, so how can we assist them further? There is no current followup process.

As described by Ganesh (2017), employees are vital to the organisation's success, and must be nurtured and supported well. Programmes such as EAP, though valuable to employees, must be assessed, evaluated and communicated effectively.

CONCLUSION

The research methods used to gather data and achieve an understanding of the perspectives of employee welfare included a survey distributed to non-managerial employees in the emergency and clinical records departments; and interviewing managerial employees in the human resources and occupational health and safety departments. The scope of the research involved a collective sample of 125 from various departments. The survey results included 60 responses. Following an analysis, three predominant themes were identified as self-awareness, communication and leadership, and employee assistance programmes.

The survey revealed a positive level of self-awareness in relation to the workload or seeing emotional stress in their colleagues. However, only half of respondents said they would communicate if they perceived a problem, indicating potential barriers to communication or a perceived distance between leaders and employees. Thus, employees have awareness of themselves and their colleagues, but face challenges in communicating these needs to management.

The interviewees revealed similar perspectives in relation to communication, where the current communication models are not sufficient to address the needs of a diverse organisation. Leadership may be contributing to this dilemma, as the perceived distance between managers and employees discourages people to come forward. The perceived ineffectiveness of the Employee Assistance Programme was another contributor to employee welfare, as there appears to be inadequate follow-up processes or reporting metrics.

Given the link between the resulting themes from the results, the change strategies identified in this research are: (1) Identify and implement ways of increasing employee engagement; (2) Create opportunities for managers and staff to communicate effectively to identify employee needs; (3) Evaluate the EAP programme to increase its effectiveness to the people who need it the most, while (4) Designing systems that appropriately support people who experience stress and empathy burnout in the course of their work, will dramatically increase employee welfare in caring professions.

An opportunity for future research would be to extend the scope of the research to multiple departments and include perspectives from senior and executive leadership, particularly to understand perspectives of employee welfare at a strategic level.

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