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Understanding the Science of Human Relations: Your most lucrative investment?

Neuroscience tells us that just as individual neurons (brain cells) cannot survive in isolation, neither can single human brains; without healthy connection to others mental unwellness develops (Cozolino, 2014). Our brain is a social organ, built to adapt to our environmental experience and hard-wired to connect to other minds, to imagine the intentional states of others, interpret both their affective expressions and bodily states of arousal and to regulate each other's internal biochemistry, emotions, and behaviours consciously and unconsciously. The brain's neurological and physiological responses are directly and profoundly influenced by our social interaction with others and increasingly these daily interactions are conducted in the workplace with our colleagues and managers, resulting in a powerful influence of these relationships on our overall wellbeing.

Positive social support directly benefits the mind and body but also protects against the negative effects of chronic stress evidenced by research demonstrating decreases in blood pressure, stress hormone levels, autonomic and cardiovascular reactivity (Cozolino, 2014). Our brains have been shaped to belong to and contribute to a 'tribe', including not only our families but in the modern world, increasingly our workplace. Conversely, research has consistently shown that negative relations and unhealthy environments, particularly critical, hostile and conflictual ones, generate higher stress hormone release and suppressed immunological functioning (Cozolino, 2014). It stands to reason then

that a positive, healthy workplace environment will produce better outcomes for both employer and employee.

Mental health is described by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community”. WHO stresses that health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or illness.

Heads of business who understand and make best use of the highly relational nature of their workforce and create cultures of wellbeing, are gaining a critical edge to effective workplace operations laying the foundation for their staff to engage in higher order thinking, complex problem-solving, improved employee productivity and ultimately profitability of their organisation. Lazlo Bock, the Senior Vice President of People Operations at Google, Inc. states that “for most people, work sucks, but it doesn’t have to...companies are made of people. And some companies remember that” (Huffington Post, Apr., 2015).

Jim Goodnight, CEO of SAS, the world’s leading business analytics software vendor, was once quoted as saying “95 percent of my assets drive out the gate every evening. It’s my job to maintain a work environment that keeps those people coming back every morning”. More recently Jeff Kennett, former Victorian premier and Chairman of Beyondblue, controversially suggested that performance bonuses of chief executives be partially tied to the mental wellbeing of their employees (The Australian, Oct, 24th, 2016). Mr Kennett said poor mental health cost the economy about \$11 billion a year but workers’ compensation was only a small part of that. He said bigger factors were absenteeism and also presenteeism, where people turn up to work but perform below their full capacity.

Leading economists including Allan Fels, Chairman of the National Mental Health Commission, estimate the costs to be even larger, as much as \$60 billion each year and 12 million lost working days in reduced productivity. Professor Fels stated that “it is a significant problem for the economy, as significant, often more significant than tax or microeconomic reform. The economic gains from better mental health would dwarf most of the gains, often modest ones being talked about in current microeconomic reform debates. The potential gains are extremely high because it has been a neglected area,” (Australian Financial Review, August 15th, 2015) “. Quantifying the expected gains from better mental health within workplaces, a 2012 study by Safe Work Australia reported that for every \$1 a workplace spends on the successful implementation of mental health initiatives, there is, on average, a \$2.30 return on investment.

Informed organisations are learning how to best maximise their employees' mental wellbeing, proactively responding to problems that arise from common organisational problems such as supporting adaptation to change and unpredictability, differing management styles, and breakdowns in interpersonal relations that result in workplace conflict. Interpersonal conflict between employees, their peers and their management, is one of the leading causes of chronic stress in the workplace and can result in anxiety, depression and decreased cognitive capacity (Australian Human Rights Commission).

Organisations are beginning to understand that the mental health and wellbeing of their workforce does not just impact the level of functioning of those individual's personally outside of their work day but significantly and increasingly, also impacts individual's performance during their work day, thereby creating an intrinsic connection between the employee's wellbeing and optimal functioning and the organisation's wellbeing and optimal functioning, as measured by productivity, staff morale and turnover, growth and ultimately profitability. Advances in neuroscience are helping to explain the science of this connection.

During the past two decades brain and mind scientists have gained a much better understanding of human nature, behaviour and the environments most conducive to healthy brain functioning. Whilst the importance of a physically safe work place has long been understood, the importance of an emotionally safe one is a more recent, albeit logical finding especially given the relational nature of the human brain. A workplace that meets not only the fundamental physical needs but also the base emotional needs of its workforce is critical if high quality thinking, problem solving and creativity is to be optimized.

Investing in proactive early intervention support strategies such as one-on-one coaching to address issues such as conflicting communication styles or challenges in interpersonal behaviour, often leadership behaviour, in addition to facilitation services to assist in conducting difficult or sensitive conversations or negotiations and professional mediation, helps to ensure an emotionally safe environment where interpersonal issues are resolved before they escalate and create a toxic environment. Such an environment inevitably has a ripple effect, creating stress not only for those staff directly involved but also those on the periphery in the form of decreased morale, productivity, staff turnover, business reputation and, if resolution is not attempted or is dealt with inappropriately, loss of managerial control of the situation, leading to legal and collateral costs.

Providing an evidence-based wellbeing framework, that begins with neuro-education to all employees from the top-down, informing employees about their

brain, it's functioning and importantly how it engages constructively with other brains, serves to foster competency in self-awareness, self-regulation, social and emotional awareness and importantly, interpersonal relationship skills. Valuable cognitive capacity once spent on worrying, anxiety and stress regarding difficult relational issues, is also freed up for learning and performance thereby optimising productivity.

Effectively synthesizing and translating the emerging knowledge from the frontiers of brain science, education and evolutionary psychology into practical application in the workplace creating a common language and conceptual framework by which to ensure healthy workplace environments, creates both tangible and non-tangible benefits for both employer and employee. This is a fundamental shift from a reactive culture to a proactive and even a preventative one, laying the foundation for a lasting culture of individual and organizational wellbeing.

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