

## Psychologically Informed Leadership

The vital importance of providing a caring and supportive working environment for staff has long been recognised. The strong correlation between staff motivation, experience and satisfaction and the quality of patient/customer experience and care has been proven.

A psychologically informed environment (PIE) is one that takes account of the emotional and psychological needs of the individuals within it. Just as services need to be designed and delivered to take account of the psychological and emotional needs of the patients/customer, so the organisational environment needs to take into account the psychological and emotional impact of work on staff.

There are currently unprecedented levels of pressure facing NHS and social care staff as they deal with the realities of the coronavirus pandemic. Equally, other organisations are experiencing these pressures in different ways, such as fragility of income and revenue and uncertainty in being able to plan strategically or operationally. In order to prevent higher levels of staff absence in the short-term through stress and burn-out, and longer-term workforce attrition resulting from more significant psychological distress, organisations need to work quickly to promote psychologically informed leadership and proactively protect staff health and wellbeing.

### OARS – A tool to help leaders support staff and teams

#### Observe (what are you noticing?)

Leaders and managers often want to act and resolve issues or problems quickly. Co-ordinating a response to covid-19 will demand this proactive and solution focused thinking and resolve. However, supporting staff well requires leaders and managers to slow down and observe:

- Are staff acting out of character. Emotional signs to observe will include:
  - Being unusually irritable with colleagues
  - Being irrational
  - Making unusual mistakes
- Are staff showing signs of being emotionally sensitive such as:
  - Crying or being tearful
  - Being withdrawn or quiet

#### Approach (get alongside the people you lead)

It is important to acknowledge what staff are experiencing and may be feeling. Speak to staff who you might be concerned about and ask:

- Are you ok?
- Do you need anything from me? How can I help?

Check that staff are looking after their physical wellbeing as this will have an impact on their emotional and psychological wellbeing. Things to consider include:

- Taking regular breaks
- Eating and drinking enough
- Getting enough sleep and appropriate rest between shifts
- Not working unreasonably long shifts

Consider how the current situation may be impacting staff outside the workplace?

- They may be concerned and worried about loved ones
- They may be worried about job losses in the family

Give staff time and space to talk. If they are feeling overwhelmed, they may need time to gather their thoughts before they can articulate clearly what they need from you (it might just be a listening ear or reassurance that they are doing a good job).

Being able to support staff through being alongside them is a powerful leadership intervention. You do not need to be a leadership 'hero' who has all the answers. But you can make a huge difference by being able to communicate:

- This is difficult and more challenging than any major incident we have experienced or prepared for in the past
- Everyone will react differently and that's ok.
- We're doing a great job in tough circumstances
- We'll get through this together not alone
- We all need support from one another
- It's ok not to be ok. It's ok to ask for help

## Resources (what can you offer?)

### Wellbeing

Most organisations have resources that they offer to staff as part of a health and wellbeing programme. Think about how you can promote and communicate this offer and remind people what is available. Some staff may never have considered these options and may be surprised to find themselves in need of additional support.

Consider lowering the usual threshold for more formal support mechanisms.

Pay particular attention to:

- People with pre-existing physical health conditions or mental health needs
- People who may have recently experienced loss, bereavement or other major life changes (e.g. separation/divorce)

### Clarity and Compassion

When people are anxious, most people require even greater levels of clarity than usual.

As a leader you can equip staff professionally and psychologically by:

- Being honest and direct about what situations staff may face and what you are asking them to do
- Being clear about everyone's roles and responsibilities
- Breaking work down into smaller and more manageable chunks, particularly if people are less experienced or new in role
- Helping them to focus on what is within their control
- Demonstrating a caring and compassionate leadership style and extending empathy with feelings of stress, worry, fear, frustration, doubt, anger.
- Communicating more often than usual and through a variety of channels – prioritising face to face where possible/or where technology can facilitate this

### Team Belonging

Foster a strong sense of team belonging. The support that staff can both offer to their colleagues and receive from their peers will be helpful, and building an experience of team camaraderie will help protect the psychological wellbeing of your staff.

Invest some of your leadership time and energy in creating opportunities for team members to be together. This may include:

- Use of simple tools to help team members connect and check-in with one another
- Talk about what is going well and what is proving hard
- Expressions of thanks and praise
- Moments of humour
- Holding onto a sense of the familiar and the ordinary as well as the extraordinary
- Maintaining a dynamic feedback loop between you and the team so that you can understand how people are faring and what is helping/what is needed next

### **Support (being supported so that you can support others)**

Be aware that you will also need to pay attention to your own psychological and emotional wellbeing. As leaders, supporting others requires you to remain well. It is not a weakness to ask for help. Creating space for yourself to reflect on your leadership practice during covid-19 and the challenges that may be ahead, will help you to remain effective and will in turn help you to lead and support others well.

Forms of support may include:

- Regular dialogue with your line manager
- Leadership coaching with an internal or external coach
- Peer support through connecting with the leadership team to which you belong or external peer networks/action-learning groups
- Multi-disciplinary collaboration across organisations and systems
- The King's Fund resources for NHS, social care, public health or the voluntary sector
- For NHS Staff – <https://www.nhsemployers.org/news/2020/04/new-staff-health-and-wellbeing-support>
- Dr Michael Bloomfield, Helping Healthcare workers to cope with stress [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=14&v=WFWvkj755Y&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=14&v=WFWvkj755Y&feature=emb_logo)
- Dr Brene Brown, Empathy vs sympathy <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ewngu369Jw>
- Professional and sector infrastructure bodies (e.g. ACEVO, NCVO)

Two of our core values centre on the integrity of partnerships, and generosity. We are deeply committed to work in partnership with the NHS and with voluntary organisations working in social care. Therefore, we are giving this resource to NHS organisations and charities to support them during Covid-19. Any organisation that receives this resource through any route can get a 20% discount on any support that we can provide during this time or on a piece of leadership and OD work with The England Partnership when Covid-19 is over. This can include support for leadership teams in the transition back to business as usual.

If you would like to know more please contact us at [covid-19.support@theenglandpartnership.org](mailto:covid-19.support@theenglandpartnership.org)