

Time to "operationalise" workplace psychological safety

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Building psychologically safe workplaces requires employers not just to encourage the right behaviours but to "operationalise" this approach, a specialist says.

More employers are now creating "lines" that mark the threshold between positive and negative behaviour, a practice that, when regularly evaluated, will enforce a positive culture throughout the coming year, says workplace resilience expert [Michelle Bihary](#).

In her latest book, [Leading Above The Line](#), Bihary refers to positive working relationships as "above the line", noting these "enhance productivity, performance and wellbeing", where "below the line" behaviour detracts from the same.

"Thinking about what contributes to a positive team environment, it's that positive ecosystem where we really encourage above the line behaviours, discourage below the line behaviours, [and] understand the risk factors to that ecosystem," she tells HR Daily.

"It's all about the greater good for everybody, and leaders having ways to address when there's too many risk factors and ways of cultivating the positive, acknowledging the behaviours that really support one another."

Bihary says that when employers define and encourage above the line behaviour, workplace culture shifts to an environment that builds psychologically safe relationships, with individuals feeling "more energised" and "not so worn out by self-criticism".

"All the research shows that those sorts of psychologically safe relationships are the most important things for performance and productivity," she says.

"[It is] great for the workplace, but also really good for rewarding, fulfilling careers and individual wellbeing. It's sort of like the gift that keeps giving."

"Operationalising" psychological safety

Leaders who are particularly successful at this "operationalise" above the line practices, Bihary says.

This can take the form of a regular, scheduled "meeting or huddle" to discuss the current state of the workplace culture and address cultural risk factors, as well as defining which behaviours amount to being above the line, and what employees wish to see more of.

Additionally, these meetings can be used to recognise employees who frequently display above the line behaviour, therefore encouraging more employees to shift their behaviour above the line and maintain a long-term positive culture.

"[Leaders give] specific feedback regularly when they see staff members displaying above the line behaviours that they want to encourage more of," says Bihary.

"There is nothing like that strong motivation when people say, 'I noticed you were really compassionate or supportive with your colleagues when they didn't know what to do'. When you're noticing and acknowledging all of those behaviours, it absolutely encourages people to exhibit more of them."

Self-leadership to improve team leadership

Leaders shifting their own behaviour above the line is what takes culture to the next level, Bihary says.

And she notes that leaders often have "double standards", in that they are "often much kinder to their peers, to their staff, and their direct reports, [than they are to themselves](#)".

"How well we are leading ourselves is really key, and that means being aware of ourselves, and [making time for self-reflection](#)."

Bihary says many leaders dwell on the negatives, which "builds a default setting to notice the negative rather than the positive".

To combat negative self-criticism, they can use self-reflection to determine and mirror the qualities that best resonate with "the way [they would] want to be led", or opt for a "buddy system".

"So, you could have two team leaders... where they meet, together, once a month, and chat about how it's going; the project of maintaining above the line leadership," Bihary says.

"It might be just a 20-minute or half-hour catch-up over lunch once a month where they get that sort of peer encouragement from each other and learn what's working, what could be improved, trying different things out together."

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