

Mentally healthy work

A CASE STUDY FROM WAKA KOTAHI NZ TRANSPORT AGENCY

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What is 'mentally healthy work'?

Mentally Healthy Work is more than our people having good mental health. It is about how we as an organisation design and manage work, as well as giving people the opportunity to build resilience in a positive way, before they need to implement it.

Waka Kotahi people practice 'bring your whole self to work', and having our people feel safe to do so has been highlighted during all stages of the pandemic and beyond. Dealing with change can be overwhelming so I encouraged my executive leadership team to prioritise wellbeing, and we provided useful tools that helped the people leaders to support their people.

Tools and initiatives on keeping our people well

COVID-19 was – and is still – an ever-evolving situation. We made sure our people were kept up to date with what was happening behind the scenes along with quickly updating them on some of the many decisions that have been made. It was important for Waka Kotahi to be prepared, but equally important to keep the situation in perspective and not to worry too much.

As a new CE to the agency, there was certainly a risk of missing the opportunity to engage with our people early and keep them engaged. I made sure I didn't miss that opportunity!

Upon reflection, several initiatives stood out as winners in engaging with our people on the developing pandemic and the extra pressure and stresses our people would encounter.

1. Being accessible, visible and real

Providing frequent access to me and the rest of the executive leadership team. This was done through a series of live interactive updates, emails and videos (vlogs). The 'work life integration whilst in isolation' calls covered balancing wellbeing and work life, how Waka Kotahi prepared for the Alert Levels and what has become the new normal.

Sometimes it is the simple things that give us the confidence in the support we are receiving from our leaders. With the small peek into our executive leaders' lives, our people saw a vulnerability, a human side if you will, showing us all it is ok to not be ok all the time. For me that meant being open about the challenges of having four kids and eight animals at home. If something goes wrong or doesn't work out, that's ok too. Let us learn and find another way to get back on track.

This also gave our people leaders permission to do the same.

It's hard juggling life and especially hard for those with young dependents – acknowledging that it is different, hectic and a bit strange. Taking the time in the live and interactive calls to acknowledge the work our people are doing, whether it is response related or business as usual.

2. Opportunities

The situation we have all found ourselves in was strange and acknowledging that our people were at different stages of processing this 'new normal' led to implementing tools to help build capacity for change and uncertainty.

Dr Tom Mulholland, an expert on workplace stress, emotional control, productivity and wellbeing was brought in to provide a few sessions on wellbeing. Dr Tom's sessions were well attended, with many staff taking the opportunity to download the KYND app (offered to all staff and their whānau free of charge) and track their own mental and physical wellbeing. He advocates that it is impossible to manage wellbeing unless you can understand and measure it first.

Dr Paul Wood, an internationally sought keynote speaker known for his energy, humour and impact was also engaged for three workshops. The sessions covered everything from understanding why some people may find you annoying / difficult to engage with or rewarding to work with to living a life that is true to yourself, rather than just what others expect of you and how to avoid death bed regrets.

Both people were available to all Waka Kotahi people, with recordings of the videos meaning that people could watch – and pause them – at times to suit them.

We also acknowledged that some of our people may not be able to continue working, and that this also causes stress. LinkedIn Learning provided an opportunity for our people to access learning and gain new skills during any downtime.



The Waka Kotahi CE Guide to 'mentally healthy work'

With the constant change in this situation and the new normal it is important that CEs stay health and well to lead effectively. You can't change the world until you first change yourself. Here are a few things I do:

✓ Establish a routine

Get up at the same time every day and always dress as if you are going to work. I planned my day as it would have been pre-COVID and worked from the same space each day.

✓ Ensure you get regular fresh air and get some exercise

At its peak I was working 16-hour days on Zoom including weekends. Exercise wasn't always easy, but I made it a priority. I always started with exercise in the morning and tried to get at least one other walk during the day even it was for as little as ten minutes', it can make you feel so much better. Popping on an 80s leotard complete with leg warmers and heading to the park for some prancercise can also have a similar effect and has the added bonus of putting a smile on the face of strangers. (Not one of my regular activities, but you never know.)

✓ Pace yourselves

Remember life is about more than just work. With four kids, home schooling, there was a huge amount of pressure on my husband and the rest of my family. So being there to offer my support when needed was a priority for me. I had no qualms about exiting calls to help my family when needed. Give yourself permission to put others first and that includes your family.

✓ Be kind and compassionate

Everyone is different and has had different experiences. Be authentic in your dealings with others. Get to know them on a personal level, find a common ground and be open to their differences. Your attitude can change a person's life. For the better or for the worse it is up to you. Most of all show kindness and compassion for yourself.

✓ Have fun and be authentic

During difficult times it is important that fun still forms part of staff engagement. I always started my videos with something fun ([here is an example](#)) to keep things real. Having ways to release build-up of pressure and stress supports healthy mind and body.

Looking Forward

The pandemic has helped expediate culture changes in many organisations. These changes are primarily in technology and flexible working arrangements, but the real shift has been in support of mentally healthy workplaces. Truly valuing our people and giving them opportunities to strengthen their mental health and bring their whole self to work will only strengthen our organisation and help us achieve our goals.

Sharing experiences and journeys with one another has helped collaboration in the workplace, and with our fellow central and local government agencies. A kind word, a smile, a small honest truth about feelings closes the gaps between colleagues. And this is just a small step on the right path.

Although the pandemic is still far from gone, we are looking to what our future holds with our lessons learnt and looking at what positive resilience looks like.

At Waka Kotahi we created five principles that we used to lead us through the alert levels; trust, care, hope, innovation and stability. These have resonated with our people and we continue to adapt these principles and use them as we work to understand the impacts of the pandemic.

We are working towards changing wellbeing at work to just wellbeing. We have some great resources developed such as our Mental Health Toolkit, it helps individuals as well as offering guidance to be able to support our people in conversations when others around who may be struggling.

We are continuing with access to our executive leadership team with live calls and CE video blogs. Our people leaders are taking part in elevator pitches (which will be back inside an elevator once we can get a little closer), allowing our people to get a little insight in how other areas of the business work.

Fun videos on expected behaviours from not standing too close and wearing identification tags give a giggle and press the consciousness button.

Helping our people better understand what we need from them and what is expected while being open and authentic is our way of creating positive resilience and mentally healthy workplace.

“Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift and that is why it is called the present,” – Kung Fu Panda.