Business Case for Safety: Psychological Safety Is the Future of Workplace Violence Control

- The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911;
- The Westray Mine explosion of 1992;
- The Metron Construction scaffolding collapse of 2009.

Sadly, it often takes tragedy for us to recognize and resolve to fix the flaws in our health and safety laws. One of those 'ah-ha' moments took place in Ottawa on April 7, 1999 when, in an effort to avenge years of being teased at work, transit worker Pierre Lebrun went on a shooting rampage, killing 4 co-workers before turning the gun on himself.

Of course, the so-called OC Transpo massacre didn't invent workplace violence; but it did raise awareness of the problem. Over the coming decades, individual provinces would change their OHS laws to require employers to deal with it. Today, identifying, assessing and managing workplace violence hazards is a universal obligation across Canada.

Workplace Violence Is the Symptom, Not the Disease

But as usual, our OHS laws aren't keeping with pace with our understanding of hazards. Thus while adding workplace violence protections is a huge step in the right direction, the

massacres keep happening. The problem is that the current workplace violence laws don't address the root cause of the problem: the behaviours and psychological stressors that cause workers to snap the way Pierre Lebrun did.

The good news is that, as they often do, the nongovernmental standards makers have a firmer grasp of the problem and a potentially effective solution that goes beyond current OHS requirements. In 2013, the Canadian Standards Association issued CSA standard CSA-Z1003-13, *Psychological health and safety in the workplace ' Prevention, promotion, and guidance to staged implementation* calling on employers to adopt measures aimed not simply at stopping violence and harassment but creating a 'psychologically safe' workplace.

Building the Business Case for Psychological Safety

While it's widely acknowledged as a best practice, building a psychologically safe workplace is not a legal obligation. And that's a disadvantage if you're an OHS director advocating the idea. But even if the leaders of your organization don't share your forward thinking or enthusiasm for saving lives, you can pitch the idea of psychological safety in terms to which they will relate: profitability.

> **$2.97 BILLION TO $11 BILLION PER YEAR**
> That's how much money furnishing psychologically safe workplaces could save Canadian employers.

The starting point: work-related mental ailments like post-traumatic stress disorder and depression have become just as costly as physical injuries'and in many cases much more common. Workers' comp and other financial awards for work-related mental injury have grown as much as 700%(!) in the past several year, the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) reports. The $11 billion in potential savings that could be realized by preventing these mental ailments comes from Dr. Martin Shain, author of the MHCC report and one of Canada's premiere experts in workplace mental health.

How the Money Would Be Saved

According to Shain, employers who set a strategic goal of managing and improving workplace mental health would benefit from significant and sustainable gains in:

- Productivity;
- Recruitment and retention;
- Cost reductions due to lower disability and absentee rates;
- Conflict reduction; and
- Operational success.

20 Things to Do

So what would your organization have to do to get its share of these savings and profitability enhancements' While there's no one-size-fits-all formula, Shain outlines 20 broad things organizations can do as part of an earnest commitment to psychological safety:

1. Issue a policy statement expressing the organization's commitment and prioritization of psychological health and safety. [[Click here](#) to access a psychological safety policy that you can adapt for your workplace.]

2. Ensure that people in your organization have a common understanding of what a psychologically safe workplace actually is.

3. Familiarize the management team with the legal and regulatory requirements related to workplace mental health and psychological safety.

4. Calculate how much stress-related illnesses'both physical and mental'are costing you organization.

5. Implement a system to measure the rates of both absenteeism and presenteeism.

6. Establish a system to determine the percentage of absenteeism and presenteeism related to psychological health and safety issues.

7. Determine the percentage of your organization's disability claims related in whole or in part to mental health or workplace conflict issues.
8. Make sure your HR and OHS policies align with OHS, labour, tort, contract and employment standards laws regarding psychological health and safety.
9. Implement a process to encourage frontline managers to provide a psychologically safe workplace via performance indicators and evaluation methods.
10. Make sure that individuals in positions involving managing, supervising or supporting workers are adequately trained, skilled and competent to make sound decisions.
11. Make sure that organization leaders and management recognize and respond to conflict in a timely and effective manner.
12. Make sure that organization leaders and management recognize are trained to identify the difference between a mental health problem and a performance issue.
13. Adopt a work-life balance policy.
14. Take measures to prevent physical, relational or emotional harassment, bullying or aggression.
15. Take measures to prevent discrimination by providing all workers with a basic level of knowledge about mental health issues.
16. Implement crisis response policies and processes for issues such as suicide, violence, threats of violence or emotional breakdowns at work.
17. Establish a process that allows for open communications among managers, supervisors and workers that enables the organization address the needs of workers who are traumatized by personal or workplace issues.
18. Implement a return to work (RTW) policy that takes into account the emotional, psychological and interpersonal challenges and allows union/worker representatives to play a role in the RTW process.
19. Implement policies and procedures for reasonably

accommodating workers and job applicants with mental disabilities.
20. 20. Be aware of the organization and/or community resources available for workers struggling with mental health issues.