Combatting Staff Burnout in Mental Health: Key Managerial and Leadership Tasks that are Fundamental to Staff Wellbeing and Retention

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Abstract
Mental health services in Australia are struggling to recruit and retain adequately qualified and experienced staff. High turnover rates and understaffing is a significant problem faced by mental health services around the world and the most common reason for this is high levels of stress and staff burnout in this field. Mental health workers are at high risk of burnout, and this not only impacts negatively on the employee, but also on the quality of the service for clients and the functioning of organisations. While staff stress and burnout can be, at least in part, attributed to the emotional demands of mental health work, organisational management and leadership style plays a critical role in protecting staff against burnout and creating workplace environments that buffer against it. This paper outlines a range of key managerial and leadership tasks that are important to staff wellbeing and retention. A discussion of these tasks is the focus of this paper.

Key words: mental health services; staff retention; leadership tasks; burnout; staff wellbeing.

Introduction
Mental health services in Australia are struggling to recruit and retain adequately qualified and experienced staff. [1-3] There is a current and projected nationwide skills shortage in the mental health sector due to the undersupply of mental health professionals and a pressing need to update practice in the mental health workforce. [3] A mental health workforce study conducted by the Victorian Government Department of Human Services [2] found that annual staff turnover is up to 22 per cent for some occupational groups. This study concluded that turnover, rather than service growth, is anticipated to be the primary driver of the projected mental health workforce shortage.

High turnover rates and understaffing is a significant problem faced by mental health services around the world. [4] The most common reason for this is high levels of stress and staff burnout in this field. [5-9] Mental health workers have poorer mental health than other health workers and employees in general. [6,8,10] A significant body of literature makes sense of the high levels of staff burnout in human services because of the emotionally demanding nature of the work. Research consistently shows that employees in emotionally demanding roles have higher staff turnover and report significantly higher levels of stress and burnout than do other workers. [11-17] While the emotionally demanding nature of the work is a significant cause of stress, organisational stressors such as working in a bureaucratic environment are also important to understanding staff wellbeing. [18,19] The increased level of complexity in structure and work evident in contemporary mental health settings also play a critical role in understanding staff burnout. [20]

Staff burnout does not only impact on employee wellbeing, but also the quality of the service for clients and the functioning of organisations. [9,21] The creation of workplace environments that enhance staff wellbeing and staff retention is critical to the development of a sustainable mental health workforce. [22-26] A strong body of evidence suggests that effective leadership is crucial in combatting staff burnout and turnover; and, in turn,
increasing productivity and client satisfaction. [9,22,27-32] For example, a recent study by Green [9] found that organisational climate and leadership accounted for the greatest amount of variance in burnout among child and adolescent mental health workers.

While it is clear that staff burnout in mental health is a significant problem, and that management and leadership plays an important role in overcoming this, which managerial or leadership tasks and styles are associated with wellbeing is less understood. To identify managerial and leadership tasks that protect staff against burnout in mental health settings, the authors conducted a review of the literature. The purpose of the literature review was to identify ways in which to better protect clinical staff against burnout in a youth mental health setting. A narrative or traditional approach to the literature search was employed as described by Cronin, et al. [33] While the process was iterative, in first instance a range of databases including Medline, PsychLit, CINAHL, Evidence based Practice (including Cochrane Library) and PubMed were searched using the key words ‘mental health’ and ‘leadership.’ Following this, the reference lists of articles specific to leadership/management in mental health settings were examined for further suitable articles. The current paper outlines those management and leadership tasks that the authors find most pertinent and helpful to inform their practice as mental health managers.

**Hire the right people for the right roles**

To create work environments that facilitate staff wellbeing, it is important to hire the right people for the right roles. [26,34] While the importance of hiring the right people is evident, how to do so is less obvious. In first instance, the issue of staff shortages and staff supply needs to be addressed. [3] Staff shortages in mental health can partly be attributed to the continuing stigma associated with mental illness. Mental illness continues to be negatively portrayed by the media and this impacts negatively on individuals’ willingness to work in mental health. [35] In addition, even though efforts have been made to address this in recent years, undergraduate and postgraduate courses do not adequately prepare and motivate students to work in mental health. [35] Possible strategies to improve supply are to liaise more closely with universities to better inform course development; to accept student placements to influence the preparedness of students for mental health work; to actively combat stigma associated with mental health work through marketing campaigns; and to promote the many positives associated with mental health work.

In terms of recruitment, it is important to look for candidates who are motivated by a desire to help others. While people leave mental health work for variety of reasons, one of the key reasons for staying reported in the literature is the meaningful nature of mental health work. [4] Workers who are passionate about mental health work and believe they can make a difference in people's lives are more likely to stay in their roles. [36,37] While it is important to recruit people who are passionate about mental health work, it is equally important that they understand the challenges involved. [34,35] It is crucial that applicants are not kept in the dark about the real nature of the work, and have a realistic understanding of the emotional demand of mental health work.

It is also important to consider the possibility that applicants may have pre-existing vulnerabilities, and how this can be best managed or supported. Some evidence suggests that high staff turnover in human services may be exacerbated by workers’ emotional vulnerabilities. [6,19,38] A number of studies have found that mental health workers have high levels of anxiety, depression and stress compared to normative populations and workers in other professions. [6,7,39] However, it is difficult to determine whether psychiatric symptomatology is already present or whether this results from the emotionally demanding nature of mental health work. [6,7] Nonetheless, some evidence of pre-existing mental health problems comes from Firth-Cozens [40] who found that students who later became psychiatrists were significantly more depressed than those who become surgeons. It is possible that people who are vulnerable to mental illness are more likely to choose mental health work rather than another occupation because, unconsciously, they wish to work through personal problems by helping others. [7] Given that predispositions to mental illness, personality and socioeconomic resources are strong predictors of stress and burnout, [41,42] it is important to consider applicants’ capacity to manage the emotional demands of mental health work, and how the organisation can best support the individual in managing the emotional impact of the work. While we do not argue that individuals with vulnerabilities should not be employed – to the contrary, these individuals offer a depth of understanding that individuals without such vulnerabilities may not – the way in which the organisation can best support these employees should be carefully considered and openly discussed. For example, while not
always practicable from an organisational or employee perspective, for some individuals being offered part-time work may be an effective strategy to help protect against burnout.

Other recruitment strategies include identifying the nature of the workforce problem by interviewing supervisors and conducting exit interviews; taking a proactive approach when recruiting recent graduates; to provide flexible working environments with the possibility of part-time work; and ensuring human resource professionals are educated about the ethos of mental health services. [34, 35]

Be ‘engaging’
The leadership model with the strongest-evidence base of recent times is that of ‘engaging leadership’ developed by Professor Alimo-Metcalfe. [20] Building on her work published in 2001, a wealth of evidence now shows that an engaging leadership approach, modelled from the top of an organisation, provides the greatest opportunity for maximising potential at individual and collective levels, in particular in mental health settings. [20] Engaging leadership is based on integrity, openness and transparency, and genuinely valuing others and their contributions. [43] Leaders that adopt this leadership style relinquish their position of ‘expert’ and work with employees in a coaching and collaborative style. [20] Evidence shows that this style of leadership is significantly more effective than one focused on systems management, goals and processes. For example, a longitudinal study by Alimo-Metcalfe, et al [43] identified ‘engaging leadership’ to be positively related to wellbeing indicators such as fulfilment, self-esteem, self-confidence, and reduced levels of stress and emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, this research found that the extent to which the team had an ‘engaging’ culture differentiated those teams that were successful in meeting government targets from those that did not. [43]

While it is recognised that a range of different leadership styles impact positively on culture, the authors identified engaging leadership as particularly useful in mental health settings because of its similarity to recovery-oriented principles in mental health. [20] The term recovery refers to a significant shift away from a paternal approach to a more collaborative approach where people with a mental illness are encouraged and supported to make their own decisions when possible. [20, 44] The recovery approach to mental healthcare is supported by a strong body of evidence that shows that it is key to ‘success’ and lies at the heart of most national and international reform agendas. [45, 46] The national framework for recovery-oriented mental health services launched in 2013 provides a vital new policy direction to enhance and improve mental health service delivery in Australia. [44] Key characteristics of both engaging leadership and the recovery approach to mental healthcare are to consider the employee/client an expert of their own experiences/ context; to treat the employee/client as a ‘whole person’; to have positive expectations of what the employee/client can achieve; to attend to and enquire about personal aspirations and to invite co-creation of vision of success and how it can be achieved. [20]

Even though adopting an ‘engaging’ leadership style may impact positively on work culture in many mental health settings, it is important to consider that mental health services sometimes have unfavourable leadership environments. Mental health services can have high levels of ambiguity and a lack of task clarity as well as high levels of cynicism or low morale. It is sometimes argued that these characteristics can benefit from a task-oriented leadership approach, or even in some circumstances from a degree of benevolent authoritarianism for a period in order to achieve change. [35] The point that is important here is that in terms of leadership there is no ‘one size fits all’; the style of leadership needs to match the local need. It is unlikely that simply importing someone’s idea of what constitutes good leadership into each and every mental health setting will be productive.

Regardless of the leadership ‘style’ as such, it is well established that getting to know staff individually is essential to effective leadership, and leaders need to make time to do so. [43] Supervisor behaviour, in particular an employee’s relationship with his or her direct manager, is critical to staff wellbeing. Some scholars go as far as to argue that supervisor behaviour has a greater effect on employee wellbeing than other factors such as stress, life and work events. [47]

Offer direction and order while encouraging autonomy and initiative

Another important leadership task is to provide enough order to protect the organisation without undermining creativity and innovation. This means that effective leaders should provide employees with a sense of control over their work and freedom to manage their work in their own way while at the same time providing enough guidance and clarity on what is expected. [48]

Staff wellbeing is strongly associated with autonomy and the freedom to take initiatives [22, 48, 49] as well as job clarity and clear direction. [7, 19, 22, 50] It is well established that role ambiguity and a lack of job clarity is a common source
of stress for mental health workers, and it is important that this is avoided. [7,19] At the same time, however, it is well recognised that people’s ability to cope is affected by their perception of whether they have control over a given situation. When the individual feels the control lies elsewhere, he or she is more likely to be affected by stress. [50] While job clarity is important, clarity should not come at the expense of the freedom to take initiatives and work in innovative ways. It is crucial that leaders support staff to take initiatives and try new innovative ways of working. Allowing and supporting people to manage, rather than avoid, risk within acceptable parameters is an essential component of leading innovations. [51]

Providing both order and direction, while at the same time supporting staff to take control over their own work and take initiatives can be challenging. Managing the tension between staff autonomy and clear direction is particularly challenging in mental health settings given the complexity of mental health work and the tendency to work in multidisciplinary teams.

While it is commonly considered best practice for mental health services to employ multidisciplinary teams, this can make leadership particularly challenging. Those in multidisciplinary teams have to cope with differences in worldview, professional identity, pay, educational background, status and attitudes. [52] The different disciplines are trained separately and rarely encounter each other until they are expected to come together and work as a multidisciplinary team. [52] This issue needs strong leadership and careful management. It can be challenging for leaders and managers to support workers’ commitment to their discipline and personal philosophies while at the same time building team cohesion and ensuring duties are performed in accordance with ever changing and sometimes contentious, best practice guidelines.

A common way to enhance multidisciplinary team working is by employing workers under generic positions with the expectation that they perform the same duties. While this can be helpful by creating a sense of ‘order’ and clear direction, it may signify a loss of professional autonomy for some staff. They find the blurring of professional boundaries stressful and disorienting and they may withdraw from team working in order to protect professional autonomy. [52] While in-depth strategies specific to managing multidisciplinary teams are outlined elsewhere [52] one strategy that can be used is to reassure staff that the perceived loss of professional autonomy will be balanced by other benefits (such as team cohesion) and that role clarity can be founded on the specific competencies and expectations associated with the role, rather than informed by the discipline.

Create an organisational culture of authenticity

The creation of positive workplace environments is another essential leadership task. Organisational culture is central to staff wellbeing. There is consistent evidence that overall organisational culture is significantly correlated with job satisfaction, motivation, performance and staff burnout. [53-55] Furthermore, evidence shows that organisational climate does not only impact on workers but extends to clients. [55, 56]

A study by Montgomery et al [55] identified burnout as the important link between organisational climate and client care. They found that workplace culture influences clinicians’ stress, dissatisfaction and burnout, and that stressed, dissatisfied, and burned out clinicians deliver poorer quality of care.

One way to alleviate, or at least reduce, staff burnout is by creating workplaces that encourage the open expression of emotion. A study by Grandey et al [17] found that environments where workers do not have to regulate their emotions with co-workers and can express freely, buffer against the burnout experience from regulating emotions with clients. This study shows that the perceived acceptance of, and respect for, workers expressing felt emotions, especially when negative, has a positive impact on staff wellbeing. They call such environments ‘climates of authenticity’ and argue that such environments are a unique form of social support. Emotional support from supervisors and colleagues increases job satisfaction and buffers against burnout. [7,22,49,57]

This conflicts with the perception that burnout may be ‘caught’ from co-workers or supervisors on the job through negative communication. [58] It is important not to pathologise emotional expression by workers. Allowing, even encouraging, workers to share emotional responses helps minimise the effects of emotional labour, and in the long run, allowing employees to express their true emotions will be positive for both clients and organisations. [8,17,59] This challenges the argument that only positive emotional expression is healthy for group dynamics, [60] and the common expectation in health care of ‘professional detachment’. [61]

It is important for leaders to establish a climate of trust or psychological safety where workers feel free to speak-up, to say what needs to be heard and not just what is wanted to be heard.
Inspire positive emotions
Another important leadership task is to facilitate positive emotions in staff. [31] While eliminating negative emotions is not possible, research suggests that increasing positive emotions in the workplace has positive effects on staff wellbeing. [62,63]

Positive emotions or ‘fun at work’ has been linked to increased productivity, creativity and both employee and patient/client satisfaction. [62,64,65] A study by Karl et al [64] found that those who experience greater levels of workplace fun have significantly lower emotional exhaustion as well as higher job satisfaction.

As noted, positive emotions can be nurtured by developing a workplace climate of trust or psychological safety. In addition, employees experience positive emotions when they are ‘in flow’ [62] and find meaning in their work. [29] It is important for leaders to ensure employees are ‘in flow’ or have a sense of feeling in the moment as much as possible. This can be facilitated by ensuring staff find their work meaningful and are given clear goals and regular feedback. The importance of meaningful work for staff wellbeing is well established. [29] As noted, while people leave mental health work for variety of reasons, one of the key reasons they stay is because of its meaningful nature. [4]

Leaders’ positivity (hope, optimism, resilience, self-esteem) also impacts on employees’ positivity or positive emotions, and has been found to be associated with employee performance and wellbeing. [31,66-68] Another way to promote positive emotions in employees is by promoting healthy lifestyles and daily exercise. Regular exercise, sufficient sleep and healthy diets promote positive emotions and protect against burnout. [50,69,70]

Encourage reflective practice through clinical supervision
Another important leadership task that improves staff wellbeing and protects staff against burnout is the promotion of self-reflective practice through regular clinical supervision. [7,36,50,71] In particular, supervision that encourages self-reflection and addresses issues around emotion management, and facilitates increased self awareness and emotional intelligence is fundamental to preventing burnout. [36,50,71,72] Central to combatting burnout are emotional resources such as self awareness and emotional intelligence. [50,71]

Achieve flexible working arrangements with regular time outs and job variety
It is also important for leaders to achieve flexible working arrangements where possible. Significant evidence underscores the importance of workplace policies and practices that support flexible working arrangements. [73] The relationship between flexible work environments and improved wellbeing is well established. [10,73] The provision of flexible working arrangements is part of a necessary strategy for improving work-life balance, and in turn, staff retention. [1]

Staff should also be able to manage their own time and workload so they can organise client contact when they feel emotionally available, and do paperwork or other tasks when they are feeling the strain of the work. [8] To facilitate this, in some cases it is helpful for mental health workers to have workloads that consists of both clinical and non-clinical roles such as research or teaching. [35] Even though this is not always possible, opportunities for interesting non-clinical work are powerful contributors to motivation and reduce burnout.

When there is limited desire or capacity for non-clinical work, it is important to ensure workers can get some distance from work that is emotionally demanding through regular breaks to ‘time outs’ to replenish emotional resources. [8,17,74,75] While talking to peers may be emotionally supportive to some, or may be an effective strategy at times, sometimes taking a short break is more effective. A five minute brisk walk can be helpful to restore emotional equilibrium.

In addition to improving wellbeing, it is well established that taking a break from emotionally demanding work improves subsequent performance. [76] Leaders need to balance workers’ autonomy to manage personal workloads and time against service demand; this can be challenging when managing a busy mental health service with high client loads.

Support professional and career development
It is important for staff to remain intellectually engaged and challenged. [77,78] To encourage ongoing learning, mental health providers should provide appropriate professional development opportunities. [1] Staff should have regular access to professional development opportunities and be encouraged and supported to attend these. Lack of opportunities for training and development slows down the rate at which staff are being educated in more flexible ways of working. This is important for developing services, but it also has a strong effect on how positive staff feel about their jobs and their careers, and impacts on staff retention.

Similarly, ensuring staff have opportunities for career progression is also important as this encourages ongoing
learning and is associated with staff motivation. It needs to be easy for trained professionals to have career change options that will keep them in the health system. [51] It also needs to be easy to return to the health system after periods away, or to move into or across the health workforce from related fields. The health system needs to offer opportunities to acquire new skills and to work and train in new settings to maximise job satisfaction. [51]

It is crucial that managers understand the importance of professional development as a motivational tool. Personal development plans are a means of identifying and recording an individual’s development needs. In some situations, redesigning jobs to capitalise on what is rewarding to employees may be an effective way to maintain staff motivation.

Offer rewards and staff recognition

Staff recognition and appreciation is another important protective factor against burnout. [38,77] The size of the reward should be carefully considered. [79] Grandey et al [79] argue that reward should be small in order to symbolise value and achievement, rather than economic gain because larger rewards may be seen as controlling as they create greater dependence on employers. Rewards that are seen as empowering or supportive are likely to enhance motivation and satisfaction, whereas those perceived as controlling may decrease motivation. [79,80]

The context around the reward also needs to be considered. Rewards in an autonomy supportive environment can motivate and satisfy employees, [80,81] while in a controlling environment the rewards may be met with resistance. [82]

In addition, how the financial reward is distributed can modify its enhancing effect on satisfaction. [79,83] The reward should be presented to only a few employees by the leader of the organisation in a public ceremony to symbolise the value of the behaviour to the organisation. [79] Non-monetary forms of recognition include flowers, cards, candy, chocolate, movie tickets or tickets to sporting events, lunch out with colleagues, gift certificates for local stores or restaurants or public praise in a meeting, conference or newsletter. A monitoring system is needed to determine who earned the rewards, but performance monitoring by supervisors can increase work pressure, [84] and may make the reward appear controlling. [79] Using client feedback forms may be an effective way to identify who to reward.

Closely connected to staff recognition is the concept of organisational gratitude. Organisational gratitude fosters employee wellbeing. [85,86] Gratitude enacted in organisational tasks is done so by members giving thanks to each other. [86] Leaders can institutionalise gratitude by publically expressing gratitude in team meetings, through company reward policies, and by creating thankful relationships amongst employees. [86] Furthermore, leaders who adopt a deeper life orientation of appreciation and move away from a deficit or complaint focus will be the leaders who truly inspire a culture of gratitude. [86]

Conclusion

Mental health workers are at high risk of burnout and this not only impacts negatively on employees, but also on the quality of client care and the functioning of organisations. Even though considerable evidence highlights the need to create work environments that protect workers from burnout, in particular in human services, how this is best achieved is not well understood, and this paper contributes to this literature.

Leadership style plays a significant role in staff wellbeing, and the leadership styles from the past are no longer effective in contemporary society. [20] The leadership style of the past – of management, control, protection of power, largely one-way communication or instruction, and the leader as ‘expert’ – don’t cut it in today’s workplace environments. [20] This paper outlines a number of managerial and leadership tasks that may assist towards the development of workplace environments that better protect against burnout and retain clinicians to provide continuity of care to clients. By attending to leadership tasks, mental health services may be able to improve organisational functioning, employee wellbeing, and client outcomes.

The management and leadership style of a mental health service does not only impact on the employee, but influences the style of the care that is provided to patients and their carers. [20] The treatment mental health workers receive from their leaders has a strong impact on how they treat their clients. [20] For example, by relinquishing their status as ‘expert’ and working collaboratively with employees, effective mental health leaders inspire and motivate clinicians to relinquish their own status of expert clinician and adopt a recovery approach in their work. [20]

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.
References


We expect that these papers will be around 3,000 to 4,000 words, requiring a specific focus on an identified topic, and will cover a variety of topics relevant to health service managers working in the Asia Pacific region. We expect that authors will suggest topics that align to their current research practice and set them up as the body of knowledge experts in that area of health service management practice. We believe that there may be papers written on, for example:

- Managing and leading nurses - what we know about nursing leadership and management
- What we know about managing staff to improve quality and safety in health care
- Goal setting and feedback – what we know about enhancing the performance of staff and teams through goals setting and feedback
- What we know about leadership and management development in health care
- What we know about the impact of national culture on leadership and management in health care

Please contact Professor Sandra Leggat on s.leggat@latrobe.edu.au for further information or to express your interest.