7 best practices to create a safe and healthy workplace while increasing your bottom line

"Canada's workers are both overwhelmed and overworked," says mental health expert Dr. Ian Dawe.[\*](http://www.wsps.ca/Information-Resources/Articles/7-best-practices-to-create-a-safe-and-healthy-work.aspx#Ian-Dawe) The resulting stress translates into $6 billion dollars a year in lost productivity and lost time, but Dawe says there is an alternative. "Understanding the human cost of workplace mental health helps employers develop action plans that will improve the bottom line as well as employee well-being."

In a presentation to members of the Ontario Workplace Health Coalition, Dawe outlined seven best practices that improve organizational performance while creating a psychologically safe and healthy workplace. Here's an overview.

1. **Create a safe and pleasant work environment** by promoting a physically safe environment and healthy behaviours. It's the job of senior management, supervisors and managers to create conditions that allow employees to succeed, Dawe told attendees.
2. **Create a happy, engaging environment** underpinned by good job design, autonomy, variety, employee voice, talent management, employment security, and a management style that promotes mutual trust and respect. "It's about having regular reviews, a structured appraisal system where you use it to help employees touch base, see if they're happy at their jobs, talk about any issues, and determine what support they might need… It's also about setting objectives, and clearly delineating goals, roles and responsibilities. Reasonable hours, agreed upon deadlines, offline time, and flexible working can also help reduce stress and boost well-being," added Dawe.
3. **Promote better communication inside and outside the workplace** to ensure employees maintain the social capital they need for good mental health. "It's really important that employees and employers work on maintaining the social capital that they need for good mental health and well-being, because how an employee feels about their company's operation turns out to be really important to their health. People who think they will be handled unfairly overwhelmingly report poorer health," continued Dawe. Managers and executives may be able to lessen stress-related health issues by fostering more secure working environments. Employee-employer relationships benefit when employees feel secure and supported.
4. **Ensure teams manage health issues proactively** by equipping specialist teams, line managers and all employees with information and skills to maintain their own health and support others. Dawe identified [Mental Health First Aid](http://www.wsps.ca/Shop/Training/Training-Schedules/Mental-Health-First-Aid-MHFA.aspx) as one example. He described it as a first responder's approach to identifying people in stress and providing immediate support. "It's not asking for employers and co-workers to be therapists… it's helping them understand and recognize what the signs and the symptoms are, and giving them some of those immediate tools and skills to reach out and ask them, 'How are you doing? How can I support you?'"
5. **Position employees and their well-being as a boardroom issue** by creating a culture where employees feel trusted and respected, based on a strategic, proactive approach underpinned by strong governance and reporting. "It's about having the board and the senior management team embracing it. It's about them seeing the importance of this construct and creating that culture all the way down the line."
6. **Understand what a voluntary approach could look like**, using tools such as CSA Z1003 - Psychological health and safety in the workplace. The standard helps workplaces map out strategies and tactics. Dawe noted that in a recent survey 71% of respondents reported some degree of concern with psychological health and safety in their workplace; 14% disagreed with the statement that their workplace was psychologically safe. "There is work to do."
7. **Make a pledge**. Be open and upfront about mental health. If you can't talk openly about something, if you can't measure it, you can't manage it, said Dawe. "That makes sense in every other facet of the business world, but it has escaped us historically in mental health," he said.

How we can help

* Learn more on WSPS' [mental health resource page](http://www.wsps.ca/Information-Resources/Topics/Mental-Health.aspx). Among the resources: e-courses, complementary downloads, articles, and videos.
* Sign up for [Mental Health First Aid](http://www.wsps.ca/Shop/Training/Training-Schedules/Mental-Health-First-Aid-MHFA.aspx), a 2-day course available onsite or in a classroom.
* Talk to a [consultant](http://www.wsps.ca/Consulting/General-Consulting.aspx) about implementing CSA Z1003. Contact Customer Care: 1-877-494-WSPS (9777); [customercare@wsps.ca](mailto:customercare@wsps.ca).
* Listen to Dr. Dawe's entire [presentation](http://www.owhc.ca/video/Practical_Tools_to_Support_Employee_Mental_Health_and_Wellbeing.html).

\* Dr. Ian Dawe is Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto, Program Chief and Medical Director of Mental Health at Trillium Health Partners, and Chair of the Ontario Hospital Association's Suicide Prevention Standards Task Force.

This article was prepared by Workplace Safety and Prevention Services (WSPS). For more information, visit [www.wsps.ca](http://www.wsps.ca/) or contact WSPS at [customercare@wsps.ca](mailto:customercare@wsps.ca).