

# LEADERSHIP: FROM A PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLNESS PERSPECTIVE

Work places are stressful at the best of times, but arguably even more so when they include lawyers working on highly pressurised, often highly complex issues that are regularly accompanied by tight deadlines. Our clients rely on us to protect their legal position, whilst facilitating the resolution they seek. Combine that with the personality types generally attracted to the practice of law and the pressures we may place upon ourselves, lawyers have become disproportionately at risk of psychological unwellness and distress. This is an area I am passionate about contributing to raise the awareness of, both within my team at Brookfield, and in the broader legal industry. But especially so from an in-house leadership perspective. A good leader, in my mind, should help his or her people to perform at their best and one's leadership style goes a long way to ensuring staff are motivated and engaged to want to come to work.

Earlier this year I committed my in-house legal team to the Tristan Jepson Memorial Foundation (TJMF) Psychological Wellbeing Best Practice Guidelines. The TJMF promotes psychologically healthy workplaces and through its guidelines it aims to assist organisations to create work places that fulfill each of 13 stated psychosocial factors identified as critical to psychological health. My team and I are working on a project to consider each factor and implement our own bespoke responses. As part of our efforts we are meeting with colleagues in the in-house space and talking about the extent of awareness about this issue and the approaches others are taking.

From a broader industry perspective, I am encouraging and hopefully energising other lawyers to think more deeply about how they practice law. Advancing your client's transaction or goals doesn't have to come at the expense of your counterparty; or at the expense of your own team's psychological or physical health. Within my team, we are inviting panel law firms to educate us about their own practices and initiatives in the psychological health space which we then consider before we release work. Behaviour that compromises the psychological health and happiness of lawyers should not be accepted as the norm.

In my view, mentoring is a form of sustainability for our profession (by ensuring

a stream of young individuals coming up the ranks), and can be used in a way to help younger lawyers who may be struggling. A recent survey<sup>1</sup> showed high levels of psychological distress and the risk of depression in law students is higher than Australian community norms and other tertiary student groups – recently, more than 20% of Australian law students were suffering high levels of distress (compared to 10% in the general population). In 2015 Justice Marshall of the Federal Court of Australia, having previously gone public about his own battle with depression, wrote that: "the mental well-being of law students would be greatly assisted by the curriculum including a mental well-being subject within it, preferably in the first year. It would also be of assistance for practitioners, academics and jurists who have battled depression to share their experiences." He also wrote that: "successful people who have battled mental distress include, to name merely a few, Mark Twain, Theodore Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln, Sir Winston Churchill, Geoff Gallop, Andrew Robb, Catherine Zeta Jones and Madonna. The mindset of knowing that they are not alone, together with the changes to law school curriculum to provide a greater focus on mental well-being, development of soft skills and an integrated attitude to the law, can only assist to improve the overall health of our law students and practitioners."

Through mentoring and by sharing your own successes and failures, as well as strategic advice, you may empower a younger lawyer. You may also help lessen the stigma associated with psychological health issues. I personally find that through the mentoring work I do, I learn more about myself and develop my own leadership and coping skills. I often feel reinvigorated after mentoring and at times leave a meeting with a sense of satisfaction at potentially having contributed to developing the next generation. By sharing your perspective, a mentor may inspire a lawyer to follow their lead or perhaps encourage them to pursue a different approach or vision. Quite often I find myself talking to young lawyers who are disillusioned with the practice of law and I try to help them see what has gone right in their career to date, what has gone wrong, what might need some rearranging and what strategies or tools they might use to realise their own vision and achieve their own goals. 



Claire Bibby

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**Claire Bibby will be presenting at the 2016 ACC Australia National Conference as a panelist in a session entitled, "Driving Change: Legal Leadership in today's complex commercial environment."**

**Her fellow panelists will be; Craig Cawood, Vice President & General Counsel, McDonalds Australia. And, Jason Ryan, Deputy General Counsel, Treasury Wine Estates.**

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.lawsociety.com.au/about/YoungLawyers/MentalHealth/Statistics/index.htm>