



Business Leaders'
Health & Safety Forum

ZERO HARM WORKPLACES

September 2019

Mental health and wellbeing at work

Downer NZ

A resource CEOs can use to support discussions with their executives, directors, contractors, workers and worker representatives.



Downer New Zealand CEO Steve Killeen talks about his company's approach to mental health and wellbeing at work, why he sees it as an opportunity not just an obligation, and what Downer is doing to create a culture where people can bring their 'whole self' to work.

“As a CEO, I’m interested in realising the full potential of the people who work for our business. Imagine what type of business you would have if you got the best out of everyone.”

Steve Killeen

Downer New Zealand



■ The opportunity

When I joined Downer 15 years ago, one thing that struck me about the company was the people-orientated nature of the business.

That probably stems from its public sector roots, and the work we do in the community building, maintaining and operating infrastructure assets like roads and rail lines. In New Zealand, Downer has about 12,000 employees and over 3,000 contractors/suppliers. Having a workforce of that size means the company pretty much reflects New Zealand society.

A few years ago, I became concerned about how things that were happening in society, in the construction industry and in our business might be affecting the mental health and wellbeing of our workforce. Downer was already very focused on keeping people physically safe, but we needed to work harder at keeping them mentally safe as well.

These concerns have been borne out by recent research. One New Zealand study found construction had the highest suicide rate of any New Zealand industry, while a study of the Australian construction industry found 46% of respondents were clinically 'burnt-out'. That wasn't New Zealand research, but similarities between the two countries' construction industries means rates of burn-out are likely to be high here too.

The law requires employers to protect workers from physical and mental harm, and meeting that responsibility is important. But my interest in wellbeing goes further than that. As a CEO, I'm interested in realising the full potential of the people who work for me. Imagine what type of business you would have if you got the best out of everyone.

So at Downer we have chosen to approach mental health and wellbeing from a positive perspective, and to treat it as an opportunity as well as an obligation.

Our starting point has been the World Health Organisation definition of mental health, that it is: *'A state of well-being in which every individual realises their own potential, can cope with normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to their community.'*

■ What we're doing

The work we've done over the past few years has been guided by the Maori concept of Te whare tapa whā, which describes wellbeing as including physical, mental, spiritual and family health.

Our approach also aligns with the Forum's model for CEO leadership of wellbeing at work, which says organisations need to focus on four areas – 'protecting', 'fostering', 'supporting' and 'reclaiming'.



We have also been mindful of Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs'. Maslow's model says that someone's needs have to be met at one level of the hierarchy before they can



move up to the next level. So, for example, there's little point offering a worker the opportunity to realise their full potential if they're struggling with literacy or numeracy issues, or are experiencing family violence at home. You need to deal with those basic needs first.



For that reason, our wellbeing programme includes a broad range of initiatives designed to meet a variety of needs. These include literacy and numeracy training, engagement surveys, EAP, assistance for employees experiencing domestic violence, mental health first-aid training, wellbeing champions and mentoring. We've worked with government agencies like Te Puni Kōkiri on initiatives that have moved over 1000 people off benefits and into employment. We also run several leadership programmes, including our Māori leadership programme, Te Ara Whanake, which has now been completed by 200 people.

Our goal with these initiatives has been to create a workplace where people can 'bring their whole self' to work and can thrive in their job.

Construction can be a combative industry, and research highlights the human impact this can have on people. I believe that as an industry we need to find better ways of working that protect people from mental, as well as physical, harm. We're starting to see that happen through leadership groups like the Construction Accord and Construction Health & Safety NZ (CHASNZ) – both of which I am involved in.

At an enterprise level, I am aware of the need to protect my people from mental harm, and there have been occasions where we've walked away from contracts and customers in order to do that. That has obvious implications for our business. But as the leader of this company, I believe it's vital that we do it.

■ What's been the outcome?

For me, the 'return on investment' from this work has been enormous.

I've seen people who've come off benefits now leading significant operations. I've seen people who've come through our Māori leadership programme becoming great leaders at work and in their community. I've seen a new batch of young professionals develop the humility and passion to change our industry and make it better. For me that's priceless.

In March we also experienced the benefits of having a comprehensive wellbeing plan in place when two of our employees were injured in the Christchurch mosque attacks. Nothing really prepares you for a horrific event like that. But having plans and processes already in place meant we could respond immediately and help those employees and their families with practical things like shopping and transport, as well as with things like EAP.

■ What I've learnt

We've still got a long way to go on our wellbeing journey. But there are three key things I've learnt so far that might be helpful to other CEOs.

The first is that you've got to take the team with you. When you are dealing with 'human-centred' initiatives it's important that they are understood across the business and are viewed as meaningful – not tick-box exercises.

The second thing is the importance of making time for conversations. We all have busy lives and important things to do. But for a CEO, conversations are the thing that keeps everything glued together.

Finally, don't sit around waiting for the 'pot of gold' at the end of the rainbow. Enjoy the journey. Take part in your organisation's wellbeing activities - whether that's being involved in developing others or attending work sports events.

“For CEOs, visible leadership is a must, so you need to be accessible and present at the finish line with your people.”

■ How to use this case study

This case study provides a practical example of how a CEO and organisation can make sense of, and take action on improving, mental health at work. It has been designed to spark discussion between CEOs and their teams. After you've read this written case study and watched the video version (www.zeroharm.org.nz/case-studies) discuss these two questions:

1. Where is your mind-set?

Steve demonstrated a clear sense of the *obligation* to protect his people by walking away from some work. He also demonstrated a clear sense of the *opportunities* created by helping people at Downer to thrive.

What is your mind-set in approaching mental health and well-being – obligation or opportunity?

2. Are you playing the full field?

This case study refers to a range of activities within Downer that demonstrate an organisation 'playing the full field' of mental health initiatives. This aligns with the Forum's evidenced-based mental health at work framework – which suggests organisations should be 'playing' in four areas – protect, support, foster and reclaim.

Looking at your organisation's approach to mental health at work, how effectively are you playing the full field across the four intervention areas?

See more about the Forum's mental health at work framework at www.zeroharm.org.nz/resources/health



Leaders make a difference

The Business Leaders' Health and Safety Forum inspires and supports its members to become more effective leaders on health and safety.

The Forum has more than 350 members, who are CEOs or Managing Directors of significant New Zealand companies.

Contact us

Email: info@zeroharm.org.nz

Phone: +64 4 499 1897

Or find out more at: www.zeroharm.org.nz

