

Chapter One



**WHY LEAD ABOVE
THE LINE?**

Impact of the psychological environment

The psychological environment of our contemporary workplace is increasingly harsh and even hostile to optimal human functioning. It undermines an employee's capacity to contribute their best to their organisation's success.

Many current workplace challenges result from poor interpersonal interactions, unrealistic expectations, and a lack of knowledge and understanding of how to create the systemic changes needed to help workplaces thrive. In fact, many workplaces create conditions for their employees that work directly against their stated goals.

A poor interpersonal environment and overwhelming expectations undermine the capacity of employees to function near their capacity and potential.

The complexity of modern workplace demands requires humans to function well cognitively and psychologically. We need to think strategically, laterally and creatively, and make decisions with increasing complexity in the context of uncertainty and diminishing resources.

From a cognitive and psychological perspective, we function well when we have the mental agility and flexibility to see situations from different perspectives including viewpoints with which we may not agree. This high level of functioning happens easily in an interpersonally healthy environment when people feel psychologically and physically safe.

The crisis of COVID-19 has provided leaders with an opportunity for enforced reflection on our workplaces. Many of us have

had the chance to deeply consider how to positively influence the psychological health of our team environment, and the creativity and performance of our teams. During this time, we have been more educated about mental health and its critical role in professional performance, and we can see more clearly the impact a poor environment can have on the mental wellbeing of the workforce.

Your organisation and its employees deserve and require the benefits of a psychological environment that enables and ensures humans can perform at their peak. Senior leaders need to safeguard and elevate this environment to achieve organisational success and make their workplace thrive.

Toxic workplaces are all too common

Over every glass of wine, beer or latte, while catching up with family, friends or colleagues, inevitably the conversation will come around to the poor state of someone's workplace.

We know it all too well. Our friend's office is in the middle of a poorly managed organisational restructure; people are facing redundancy and morale has hit rock bottom. Our partner's team is led by a nit-picky micromanager, which results in endless discussions about the impact on their workplace. Or, our cousin works in an organisation hell-bent on ignoring the effect of a senior manager who is a bully, possibly even a psychopath, and is wreaking havoc on the entire department, haemorrhaging their best talent and experiencing unprecedented turnover.

During the pandemic, while many of us are working from home, workplace politics have shapeshifted into different forms. Bullies

are finding ways to use social media to continue their harassment and others are exploiting the isolation of their direct reports to inconspicuously wreak psychological warfare.

Unfortunately, the above scenarios are not isolated incidents. They are examples of what we expect to be an almost inevitable part of the contemporary workplace. Employees head into the office (physically or remotely) each day gearing up for the unpredictable onslaught of interpersonal pressures and unmanaged egos. Many workplaces ignore the impact this has on their employees' capacity to perform their roles and the strain it creates professionally and personally for a committed workforce. Despite the stream of defectors from corporations to start-up nirvana, emerging research shows that the interpersonal issues and pressures may be no better managed in this newer frontier.^{13,14,15}

Overwhelming pressures are counterproductive

Leaders and employees everywhere are overwhelmed. According to Deloitte and many other researchers, global trends show that over the past decade, the modern workforce is experiencing a cascading set of unprecedented stressors and demands.^{16,17}

Most leaders and employees I speak with are mentally and emotionally exhausted from facing excessive cognitive and psychological demands. They have way more work than is possible to complete within their working hours and they often experience unrealistic pressures and challenges.

The most troubling aspects have been the significant interpersonal tensions and conflict, and the irresponsible, hostile

and aggressive behaviours that are increasingly commonplace in our workplaces. Coupled with the constant requirement to adapt and change, these challenges create immense strain. Far from helping us perform at our peak, these pressures promote reactivity and undermine our ability to bring our best to the workplace. They also encourage us to slip into patterns of behaviour that we would consider below the line: actions that are distressing to be on the receiving end of and that create significant stress, mental health issues and even trauma.

Humans are wired for self-protection

In an environment that is psychologically unsafe, humans instinctively shift into self-protection mode. If we sense that a colleague is in a bad mood, or is irritable or unreliable, we are more likely to be on guard. This is amplified when a manager or group of colleagues operates in less predictable, impatient or overly critical ways.

We all have a primitive part of our brain that is programmed to scan our environment continually to ensure we are physically and psychologically safe. It's like our antivirus software. If the primitive or reptilian part of our brain detects a threat to our physical or psychological safety, our brain redirects its attention to survival and self-protection. This antivirus software then takes precedence, using most of our human processing power to deal with the risk at hand.

If we are working in an environment where one has to exert significant mental and emotional energy in self-protection, it takes a substantial cognitive and emotional load to keep concentrating

on one's work demands simultaneously. The superhuman effort that this requires creates enormous drain and strain.

I hear many leaders and employees describe feeling unsafe at work, mostly psychologically unsafe. Perhaps stormtrooper gear would be more appropriate attire for the toxic or harmful environment in which they find themselves.

Well-meaning guidance to cope with contemporary workplace demands can further complicate the situation. Suggesting a mindfulness app, lunchtime yoga class or employee assistance session by way of enduring a psychologically toxic environment is unreasonable and potentially damaging. It unfairly places the responsibility for dealing with the stressors on the employee.

The impossible challenge of work / life balance

Added to this are the changes in how we are working. No longer are there clear distinctions between work and home. The boundaries are blurred; employees are increasingly expected to be available for extended work hours or out of work hours' contact. This further exacerbates the problem where the cognitive and psychological demands of work drain the bulk of each employee's energy reserves. This has been amplified during the pandemic period.

Often, employees describe how they end each workday absolutely gutted, with nothing left for themselves or their loved ones. No-one wants to live and work like this. The pandemic has amplified the need to refocus on our highest priorities and life goals.

The demands of the contemporary workplace require that we often borrow from home, in order to pay for work.

Is this sustainable both for humans and organisations?

Leaders and employees everywhere are asking whether this way of working is sustainable for the success of the workplace and the workforce. Many organisations are haemorrhaging talent. This will increase if they do not adjust their business models. COVID-19 has opened people's eyes to the alternatives. Organisations are losing access to their employees' potential and capabilities. Levels of absenteeism, presenteeism, disengagement and burnout are unacceptably high and rising exponentially. High turnover in some industries makes it difficult to provide consistent customer service, which alienates a loyal customer base. Emerging research shows that factors such as turnover and absenteeism are impacting customer service in many areas, ultimately placing the workforce under increased pressure.^{18,19,20} In healthcare, for example, these factors put the community at higher risk.

Leaders are looking for ways to create human sustainability. As well as recognising the serious impact on business priorities, we can no longer ignore the human cost, and the moral and ethical dilemmas of unacceptable workplace pressures.

The current pandemic has repositioned and elevated the importance of mental health and wellbeing. The government and media have never more clearly addressed the vital role that mental health plays in our community. One of the most common

questions I have been asked this year by leaders managing employees remotely is how to check in and ensure their colleagues are travelling OK.

In 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) took the unprecedented step of classifying ‘burnout syndrome’ as an occupational phenomenon. This move highlights that burnout is not a medical condition and should not be used to describe experiences in other areas of life.

The WHO outlined three key characteristics of burnout:

1. Feelings of energy depletion and exhaustion.
2. Increased mental distance from one’s job, and feelings of negativism and cynicism.
3. Reduced professional effectiveness.

Humans, not robots

The modern-day workplace has not adequately taken into account how humans are wired. This level of denial of our human selves is a key factor in why we are experiencing an explosion of burnout, overwhelm and workplace stress. Workplaces do not adequately consider how we function from a biological, neuroscientific, psychological or interpersonal perspective. In fact, the approach of some workplaces is to treat its employees like automatons—they are expected to work like robots. (Some examples include legal work and call centres.) Perhaps it’s not surprising that stormtrooper suits might feel more protective.

To ensure employees have the best chance of applying their greatest skills and capacities in their professional roles, we need to understand, actively shape and manage the environment that supports them to function at their peak.

But we pay them very well

Some organisations reassure themselves that a strong salary package compensates for workplace pressures. However, the belief that a truckload of money will circumvent the professional and personal impact is gravely mistaken. No amount of money, status or perks can put a stop to the long-term damage that some of the worst dynamics and pressures create. In his book, *Dying for a Paycheck*, Jeffrey Pfeffer challenges the current thinking about work and brings together immense research to show that employees across the globe are dying from overwork. Some dying literally, and some dying from the absence of meaning because work is sucking every ounce of their mental and emotional energy.²¹

Some of us are witness or subject to the worst of what the world of work has to offer: workplace bullying, harassment or discrimination. These behaviours take many forms: incivility, shaming, unacceptable expressions of anger, overt or covert hostility, aggression, contempt and antagonism, blaming, unpredictability, frequent criticism, negating, sarcasm, eye-rolling, social isolation ... the list goes on.

These behaviours are all below the line. They have a negative psychological impact. Especially when sustained, they damage our mental health and wellbeing, and cause mental health issues and trauma.

At the most devastating end, they have unbearably heartbreaking consequences. Research shows that workplace stressors and bullying result in increased suicide rates, mental illness, trauma and serious physical illness to name a few.^{22,23,24}

Questions for reflection:

What is happening in your world?

What are you observing in your workplace?

How does your current work environment compare with others in which you have worked?

How would you describe the interpersonal environment?

Rethinking work

Look at what's happening in our world. We are seeing complex advances in technology and how we are living our lives. We are experiencing a time where people are burning out from working 12–15-hour days. The way we are working is not sustainable. We're expecting more with less.

We're all seeking simple solutions to that complexity.

Meanwhile, there are countries like Sweden that have explored working six-hour days. There are innovative companies that have found a four-day working week has led to higher productivity, more motivated employees and less burnout. These organisations are living in alignment with extensive research, which highlights that we perform at our peak when we work less than 40 hours per week.^{25,26,27,28,29,30} We are not achieving more by working more hours. Instead, we take 45 or 55 hours to complete the same amount of work, and we suffer because we have significantly fewer hours to replenish and recharge.

The unhealthy workplace

We need to rethink the cost of work on our health and wellbeing. Never have we been so aware of the negative impact that our stressful and sedentary life is having. We sit for many hours a day glued to technology; we are disconnected from the environment, nature and sunlight, and distanced from the most critical relationships in our lives including our relationship with ourselves.

Research shows that what we are doing workwise is not sustainable.^{31,32} We need to think structurally, strategically and systemically about how we can work differently. Part of this inquiry must consider how to boost productivity so we can perform at our peak while being mindful that we maintain wellbeing and a meaningful home life.

iRobot no more

We can't solve 21st-century challenges with 20th- or mid-20th-century solutions.

Schools often teach us to be a cog in the production line. However, accelerating advances in technology, societal changes, social media and robotic social engineering (for want of a better word) is falling away. Today, there's greater freedom to be truer to ourselves and our individuality, and in how we live and the life choices we make. The explosion in microbusinesses, entrepreneurships and online companies are examples of this.

Solutions that revert to old-fashioned thinking are dying out. Today, we know ourselves in a way that brings out the finest within us. In our yoga-centric, mindful and self-development environment, we value living with authenticity and integrity, bringing out our potential and utilising autonomy to take

responsibility for ourselves. And research supports this.³³ Being authentic, being open about learning, and living and working in alignment with our values is good for us and far better for our workplaces.

Are organisations lacking self-awareness?

At an organisational level, businesses are losing credibility with a public that demands trust and social responsibility. Increasingly, boards are under pressure to address the deficit in public trust that has given social-media savvy consumers defining power not previously available. The community is disillusioned by organisations that have shirked their responsibilities to care for their customers and employees. Businesses are increasingly under pressure to act with integrity and decency, and to ensure their shareholders are no longer the only beneficiaries—everyone must profit from their endeavours.

Stress is the chronic disease of the workplace
and bullying is the malignant cancer.

Some workplaces have developed a total disregard for human and personal consequences of unreasonable workplace expectations or treatment. In these workplaces, when people are underperforming, are unproductive or are not meeting KPIs, the responsibility and blame is placed on the employee. They are performance-managed, dressed down, humiliated or shamed. There is no consideration of the degree to which the toxic environment has played a role. If someone raises this as

a possibility, the idea is shut down and all the responsibility is placed back on the employee.

*‘When a flower doesn’t bloom,
you fix the environment in which
it grows, not the flower.’*

—Alexander den Heijer

Is resilience the key?

When an employee is overwhelmed, or unable to cope with overwork and impossible demands, we frequently blame the individual. We infer they are not resilient. These words can be heard in the most alarming places like hospitals and emergency departments, where doctors and staff are expected to work superhuman hours and carry impossibly high caseloads beyond what is physically (or emotionally) possible.

Recent Australian research into bullying and the psychosocial safety climate highlights that as an employee’s psychological and emotional workload increases, so does the prevalence of bullying.^{34,35} More ‘caring’ environments like healthcare and community services can be the least caring for their workforce.

It is shocking to know that at least five large Australian public health services have lost their medical training accreditations in the last few years because of workplace bullying.^{36,37,38,39} Even more heartbreaking is the increasing level of suicide rates among doctors and nurses. This situation is outrageous in workplaces that have the expertise to comprehend fully and act on the physical and psychological consequences of such demands.

We recognise resilience as a vital skill in today's workplace. Undoubtedly, many people can benefit from building skills in adaptability. However, it seems we are misusing this concept. We now expect employees to use resilience to cope with inhumane working hours or to tolerate toxic workplace behaviour or culture. No amount of resilience training can help the human mind, body or soul cope with unreasonable demands or a highly toxic interpersonal environment.

Basic needs to thrive

For people to thrive, to perform at their peak, and to be engaged and motivated, their core human needs must be met. It has been well established by writers such as Maslow and Hanson that we all share common human needs.^{40,41} It has become vital for organisations to take heed of this understanding and to not expect employees to work long hours that result in them having little energy to take home to fulfil their human needs.

What are our common and essential human needs?

1. **Safety:** both physical and psychological.
2. The need to feel **Valued:** that we are worthy and we matter.
3. **Fulfilment:** to have meaning and purpose, to develop ourselves, to have opportunities to learn, grow and develop and to benefit from meaningful activities and from fun and satisfaction.
4. **Connection:** positive relationships at home *and* at work.

In the context of overwhelming demands, when work requires the bulk of our physical, mental and emotional energy, it is easy to see how hard it is to fulfil these needs adequately. Emerging research points to this as one contributor to the escalating rates of depression.⁴²

Mental health research

Research into the mental health of the workforce reveals that when our core human needs are not being met, we are highly vulnerable to an increased risk of mental illness. It highlights that when employees feel unsafe, unfulfilled and disconnected they are 200–300 per cent more likely to experience mental illnesses such as depression or anxiety.^{43,44,45}

- Employees feel unsafe when they are subject to excessively high work demands. They feel psychologically and / or physically unsafe.
- Employees feel unfulfilled when they have little control or influence over their work—there is a lack of fulfilment.
- Employees feel disconnected when they are socially isolated at work, or when they don't feel valued or when they feel they don't matter.

In contrast, research shows that when C-suite and senior management increases commitment to promoting psychological health and safety, the prevalence of workplace bullying decreases.^{46,47}

The old way was organisational success at the expense of the workforce. The new way is organisational success aligned with employees' potential, productivity and wellbeing.

Thriving ecosystem from the top

The purpose of this book is to enable people to fulfil their potential, and to help create peak performance and thriving workplaces. It is about what happens when senior leaders require that the organisation aligns with above-the-line behaviours that genuinely prioritise people and their wellbeing so that they can truly perform at their peak.

To achieve a thriving workplace, senior leaders must create an ecosystem that supports people to perform at their peak while sustaining resilience and wellbeing. This can only happen when the workplace prioritises the productivity, potential and wellbeing of the workforce at all levels of organisational functioning. This ‘whole systems’ approach involves leadership and management approaches, workplace culture and the psychological safety of the workplace.

A thriving ecosystem helps capture the notion that all elements interlink and influence each other. It harnesses and amplifies the positive aspects of workplace functioning that lead to a thriving organisation. It is not that the business or workplace thrives at the expense of other parts; it is that the ‘whole’ thrives in a way that calibrates with everyone thriving. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it’s who is needed and the value they bring.

Your company needs all of you

The nature of the modern workplace requires so much more of our engagement and individuality. Think about service industries where it’s no longer adequate to be a widget in a factory. Today, we expect employees to bring their whole selves to work; personality, energy, sense of humour, relationship skills and the willingness

to work as part of the team are all highly valued and essential workplace skills.

We're not paid to show up physically and work like a robot. Showing up with just our knowledge and intellect is not enough. Customer service expectations require that we bring our heart and soul to work. It's about relationships, teamwork, connection and belonging. It's about engaging (with customers or with colleagues) and the impact that has on our workplace and workforce. It's about who we are as people physically, mentally and emotionally at a deeper soul level.

We call these traits 'soft skills', yet these are the hardest skills to learn and teach.

When workplaces measure employee engagement, they are measuring the degree to which their people bring their whole selves to work. Are they just turning up and being compliant and sleepwalking through their day, or are they engaged, passionate, caring and contributing to the team and the workplace?

For employees to bring their whole selves to work, they need to feel valued and appreciated, not like a commodity that can be readily replaced. The contract is two-way: when workplaces value employees as whole humans, employees will bring their whole selves to the workplace.

IN SUMMARY

In this chapter, we've examined how workplaces vary in how the psychological environment functions and how it is managed by senior leaders. We've noticed that workplaces can function above or below the line, and that above the line is good for workplace success and is vital in supporting thriving and resilient employees.

In the next chapter, we explore how the workplace functions as a psychological environment, where 'the line' is and how it can be influenced.

Questions for reflection:

What words would capture your best days and worst days at work?

Do you see it getting better, staying constant or getting worse?

Regardless of whether you have a positive or negative experience, what factors do you believe contribute to this?

What are the worst behaviours you observe in your workplace?

How does your workplace deal with this at the time?

How does your workplace deal with this in the long term?

What about your close family and friends? Reflect on how they might answer these questions?

Want more?

Thank you for reading *Leading Above the Line*.

My intention for writing this book was to give you a deeper understanding of workplace psychological dynamics and help you to build strategies to elevate yourself, your employees and your workplace higher above the line.

I hope this book will become a resource that you will draw upon regularly, and that you will share your learnings with others.

As this field is continually evolving, I will develop more resources and programs that will help you thrive, amplify potential and build psychological responsibility and safety in your workplaces.

Connect with Michelle

If you would like to keep in touch, you can:

1. Email me directly with your learnings and experience. I'd be delighted to hear from you and I'm always keen to hear how you are implementing and sharing your learning.
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2. Connect with me on LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/michellebihary/>
3. Read my blog at michellebihary.com [or michellebiharyhealth.com if you're a health or community sector professional]
4. Sign up to my emailing list through my websites: michellebihary.com or michellebiharyhealth.com

Work with Michelle

I'm known for delivering game-changing programs for workplaces all over Australia and New Zealand, and for my engaging keynotes and workshops at Australian and international conferences.

I create customised programs for in-house delivery and I also have a range of public programs. These programs continue to evolve; however, as at November 2020 they include:

1. ELEVATE – Lead an Above the Line, Psychologically Safe and Thriving Team
2. People Leadership Development
3. Self-Leadership Development
4. From Risky to Robust – Leading a Psychologically Safe and Thriving Health Service
5. Professional and Workplace Resilience
6. Thriving at Work – Mental Wellbeing Matters
7. Thriving Professional Women's Program
8. Emotional Intelligence for Leaders and Customer / Client Service Roles
9. Mentoring and Professional Supervision Programs

If you think you or your team would benefit from one of my programs and you'd like to have a chat, please reach out. I am also happy to make time to discuss your needs and see if there is a match with what I can offer.

Thanks again

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Glossary

Above-the-line behaviours are acceptable, healthy and responsible from a human, psychological and interpersonal perspective. They are good for people; they bring out employees' capacity to function at their best.

Below-the-line behaviours are not acceptable, healthy or responsible from a psychological and human perspective. They are not in the best interests of people and they diminish performance and wellbeing.

Brain

Executive brain is the source of our best thinking and psychological functioning. It enables us to be creative, proactive and strategic, to see things from multiple perspectives, make our best decisions and be mentally and psychologically agile. The executive brain sits behind our forehead.

Brainstem / Reptile brain becomes more active when stimulated by the amygdala when we feel unsafe or stressed. The amygdala sits above the brainstem in our limbic system. We're likely to function in more reactive and less considered ways. When our reptile brain is active, it is much harder for us to access the higher order thinking capacities of our 'executive brain'. The brainstem sits at the back of our head, down near our neck.

Interpersonal neurobiology (or **relational neurobiology**) is the emerging area of research exploring the ways interpersonal relationships and the psychological environment shape our brain and its functioning. When we're in positive relationships with our manager and team, we're far more likely to function optimally.

Neuroscience (or **neurobiology**) is the study of the nervous system, including physiology, anatomy, biology, mathematical modelling and psychology to understand neurons and neural circuits, and how these influence our functioning, learning, behaviour and relationships. Technological advances in recent years have accelerated neuroscientific research enabling us to observe the influence of neurons and neural pathways of our thinking, relationships and environment.

Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to continually adapt and change; it is influenced by our thoughts, interactions, experiences and environment. Advances in technology highlight neuroplasticity as a dynamic process in which our brains are engaged throughout our lives. Neuroplasticity can be intentionally optimised by using our thoughts, behaviours and relationships to fulfil potential in our performance and wellbeing.

Presenteeism is when employees are at work but are not fully functioning so productivity and performance is significantly diminished. Presenteeism appears to be a much costlier problem to a workplace than absenteeism, although it is harder to observe and assess.

Psychosocial climate refers to workplace culture influenced by interpersonal and psychological factors.

Psychological contract is the implicit and unspoken agreement about what behaviours are acceptable and what behaviours are unacceptable in each relationship, team and workplace.

Psychological literacy is the ability to be aware of, understand, be reflective of and articulate one's own and others' behavioural and mental processes. People who have high psychological literacy are emotionally intelligent; they have emotional awareness of self and others, and they have emotional expression.

Psychological safety: Psychological safety as described by Amy Edmondson, Harvard Business School professor is a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes. It refers to the psychological environment where it is safe to take the interpersonal risks of learning. Research has shown that psychological safety is the number one factor that contributes to high performance in teams.

Thriving workplace ecosystem refers to a workplace environment that is positive and healthy for humans. It naturally brings out the best in employees, and supports business success, employee performance, wellbeing and engagement.

Toxic ego-system refers to when the workplace environment is toxic and unhealthy for humans. It is driven by ego and poor interpersonal dynamics that work against employees fulfilling their potential. It can include bullying, harassment and discrimination and is below-the-line.

Further readings

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