



# Six guiding leadership principles: how to support your team

Have you ever reflected on the role you play in supporting your team members in terms of their mental health? Have you considered whether your previous responses to situations have helped a team member feel understood and supported, or alienated and invalidated? We understand that with the business pressures and uncertainties associated with the current climate, it may not have been something you have consciously reflected on.

Our Umbrella team often hear that conversations about mental health are some of the most anxiety-provoking conversations for leaders. Leaders are often afraid that they may make the situation worse and therefore they may put off having conversations with team members unless things get really bad. Others may jump in and take control, thereby inadvertently taking autonomy away from a struggling team member.

Therefore, we have put together six guiding principles to help you most effectively support team members who may be struggling with their mental health.

Statistics indicate that 1 in 5 New Zealanders will experience mental illness in any 12-month period, and 47% of us will meet criteria for a mental illness within our lifetimes (Hauora Study, 2015). Based on these statistics, there is a high likelihood that at any one time you may have someone in your team struggling with their mental health. To help you manage people struggling with mental health, we outline the following six guiding principles in our [Promoting Mental Health at Work](#) and [Managing Mental Health](#) workshops. These workshops are specifically designed for leaders, and the guiding principles presented in the workshops can be used to help inform your thinking, conversations and actions.



Collaborate

Negotiate

Collective  
responsibility

Support you

Practise

Be human

## 1. Collaborate

When a team member is struggling with their mental health it can be tempting to jump in and try to solve their situation. By doing so, we can sometimes take control, make decisions on their behalf and give our advice freely. Remember that the team member knows themselves better than anyone else, so make sure to seek their input and listen to them. Take a note of whether the conversation feels reciprocal or whether you are doing most of the talking. Support and empower the team member to speak up. Ideally you are taking on a listening role, which means, where appropriate, seeking clarity and providing a verbal summary of what the team member has said. This sends a powerful message that you have been listening.

**Example of a helpful question: How do we manage this well together?**

## 2. Negotiate

Leaders sometimes express a sense of pressure, which makes it seem as though all of the responsibility for a team member's mental health at work sits with them. No-one should ever hold all of the responsibility. It is important to be explicit and communicate who is doing what in response to any agreed plans or commitments. It's important as a leader to have limitations and boundaries in order to improve health outcomes for the team member and manage the impact this has on you.

**Example of a helpful question: What can I do and what can you do to make this better, or to shift this?**

## 3. Collective responsibility

Mental health conversations can be tricky and emotionally heavy. As a leader, it's important to know what internal support services are available within your organisation, as well as appropriate external services. For example:

- Have a good practical knowledge of your organisation's staff wellbeing initiatives, such as peer support programmes.
- Know what team members can expect if they reach out to employee assistance programmes (EAP) – they may be concerned about cost, confidentiality, who they might be referred to (and whether they can choose someone else) etc.
- Find out who is the best contact on your People and Culture team.

Having good practical knowledge of these supports and connecting a struggling team member to them can go a long way. It's also helpful to understand what family and community supports might already be in place, and how to help the person reconnect to them. Remember that unless you are a trained mental health practitioner, you are not expected to act as one.

**Example of a helpful self-reflection question: Who else can I use as a soundboard and/or plan with to most effectively support the team member?**

## 4. Support you

Prioritising your own self-care is vital. It can be easy to get caught up in another person's distress and not prioritise our own wellbeing. As a leader, it is easier to care for others and manage your team's wellbeing if you are disciplined in your own self-care. This provides a firm foundation from which to work. This might begin with being gentle with yourself and protecting activities at, and outside, work that restore you. It might also include the use of the professional service to enable you to talk through, and process experiences, and reflect on your decisions.

A previous manager I worked with prioritised getting out of the office at least once a week to go for a lunchtime bike ride. He emphasised that this "kept him sane", juggling a busy and high pressured role and being a dad of three teenagers.

**Example of helpful self-reflection questions: Who can I call on to support me? When was the last time I checked in on my own wellbeing?**

## 5. Practise

When having mental health conversations with your team members, there will be aspects of those conversations that come naturally and other aspects that you may find challenging. Make opportunities to practise having those conversations and how you might conduct yourself in those circumstances – either talk to yourself or with a trusted colleague. By practising checking in, saying the words that feel genuine and right for you, or practising your tone of voice and body language, you will gain confidence to apply the skills in difficult moments.

**Example of a helpful self-reflection question: What aspect(s) of mental health conversations do I find most challenging?**

## 6. Be human

Remember to be human and exercise your compassion. Understand that you are dealing with another human who has their own strengths and challenges. It's important to be your authentic self. Don't worry if you feel "a bit clumsy". Bring to mind your values, such as respect, kindness and fairness, and let these guide your actions.

Example of a helpful self-reflection question: What leadership skills and values do I want to draw on when having mental health conversations?

In summary, navigating mental health with someone who might be struggling in the workplace can be complex. It can be helpful in moments of uncertainty or anxiety to come back to the six key principles outlined above. For more information, knowledge and skills, contact Umbrella about our workshops specifically designed to support leaders in promoting good mental health at work.

### Action plan

What will I do to bring these guiding principles into action?

How can I take these ideas back to the team?

What first step will I take to get started?