Poor culture can damage workers' mental and physical health

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Poor workplace culture can have a huge effect on people's mental and physical health, and it's time business leaders addressed the issue urgently.

Measuring how a workplace affects staff has been difficult to do accurately, which has meant other aspects of business have taken priority over culture. Culture was seen as important but not urgent.

It's time the quarterly figures included metrics other than dollars, square metres and ratings — otherwise the unintended consequences can be horrific, as has been the case with Orange France.

Between 2008 and 2009 the company, then called France Telecom, had 35 employees commit suicide. Chief executive Didier Lombard took the legal position that he could not be held accountable for people he had never met deciding to take their lives.

The fact is some suicides happened on premises, and most of the notes left behind blamed the working environment and the culture. One note described the culture as "management by terror".

Even after Lombard resigned in 2010, the culture remained emotionally violent. In 2013 11 people took their lives, and in just the first three months of 2014 10 people killed themselves.

What is unprecedented about the Orange France case is that it raises the question of who is accountable for the way an employee feels. The case strongly suggests while one person may have a powerful effect on others, the truth is we all affect each other.

The law in most countries sides heavily with individuals being accountable for their own reactions to the way they feel. This is definitely the most efficient method of addressing the problem, but it is not a solution because the reaction is not the problem. The problem occurs before the reaction.

The solution lies in people changing their thoughts and feelings before the behaviour causes negative effects to occur. This will require a mind-shift where everyone takes responsibility for the way they feel and the way they make others feel.

It's not about blame. It's about accepting we are all able to respond in ways that create a positive working climate around each other. Especially now in Australia.

In 2013, Australian levels of bullying in the workplace were 6.8 per cent, as reported by Safe Work Australia. This was above international levels. Work pressure and work-related harassment made up more than 50 per cent of all mental stress claims.

"Depression costs Australian employers about $8 billion per annum, and $693 million per annum of this is due to job strain and bullying," according to Safe Work Australia.

The most commonly cited ways the workplace negatively affects employees are criticism, undervaluing efforts, false accusations, gossip and having comments dismissed in meetings.

Part of reaching a solution requires that we recognise negative effects in the workplace before they cost the business financially and employees their health and, in extreme cases, their lives.

North Carolina State University has used facial recognition software to recognise when students are unchallenged or overwhelmed by their work. Microsoft uses the same kind of affective computing to create more immersive gaming experiences for customers.

Heightening our awareness of what affects us requires each of us to take responsibility for how we affect others. Focus and reflect on how you affect others and, no matter how frightening it is, interact with people face to face.

Technologies that promise to connect people without the need for "inefficient and messy" interactions with people are masking the core issue.

Matt Jackson is founder of affectors.com and the author of The Age of Affect.