

Employing people who have “been there, experienced that” to inform innovative HRM responses to workforce mental health issues: practice insights from industry

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How can Mental Health Advocate roles help address workforce mental health issues?

Take Home Messages

- There is a need for proactive measures to combat mental health stigma and support employee well-being within Australian workplaces.
- Energy Queensland demonstrates an innovative approach to addressing mental health issues in the workplace by purposefully employing

individuals with personal lived experience of mental health challenges as 'Mental Health Advocates' (MHAs) within organisations.

- A number of things were said to have aided the success of the MHA roles at Energy Queensland, including:
- Strong buy-in and sustainable financial commitment from senior executives
- MHAs' strong partnership with key stakeholders, including executives, HR, unions as well as frontline employees
- Empowering MHAs to autonomously craft their roles and providing flexibility and support for their well-being enable these roles to be effective, impactful and sustainable.
- Energy Queensland's experiences offer valuable insights for other organisations seeking to implement similar strategies for addressing mental health issues in the workforce.

Background

Mental health issues are a significant concern in Australia's workforce, costing billions annually and impacting organisational performance due to absenteeism, presenteeism and reduced productivity. Despite a series of

interventions being put into place, stigma towards people with mental health challenges persists, hindering effective help-seeking behaviours on the part of employees and meaningful cultural change on the part of organisations. Drawing on an exemplary practice implemented at a large Australian organisation, this paper explored how employing individuals with personal lived experience of mental health challenges as mental health advocates within organisations can help address this challenge.

While designated Lived Experience roles have shown promise in mental health services, their application in non-mental health sectors hasn't previously been explored. This study focused on Energy Queensland's implementation of designated Lived Experience roles, specifically the Mental Health Advocate (MHA), and articulated their journey towards achieving positive impact from these roles.

About Energy Queensland

- Energy Queensland, which delivers electricity across the Australian state of Queensland, was formed in 2016 through the merger of two state-based power companies.
- The company operates in a challenging environment, with field workers often exposed to hazardous and mentally taxing conditions during emergency response situations.
- Energy Queensland has over 8,500 employees (at the time of writing), including approximately 4,500 field staff and over 450 apprentices (the biggest apprentice workforce Nationally).
- Energy Queensland emphasises a culture of care and support for its

workforce, driven by leadership's commitment to diversity, inclusion, and employee well-being. This commitment differs from the sector's historical culture of leaving personal problems at the door and reflects a shift towards greater openness and support for employee well-being.

Method

To identify the MHA's day-to-day practices, key success factors, and organisational lessons learned desktop research was conducted and multiple conversations were had with key stakeholders.

Employing Lived Experience roles as a solution to workforce mental health issues: How the mental health advocate (MHA) roles came about

Overall, the creation of MHA roles represented a proactive response to mental health challenges within Energy Queensland, emphasising inclusivity, transparency, and proactive engagement. The figure below shows how this process unfolded.

Critical assessment of pre-merger mental health support revealed inadequate strategies and high employee suicide rate.

Initiation of 'MATES in Energy' suicide prevention program highlighted need for improved mental health initiatives.

Insights from the dedicated steering committee deepened understanding of workforce mental health challenges.

Two field employees with personal experiences proposed creation of MHA roles, which was endorsed by top executives.

The two MHAs conducted comprehensive outreach efforts across various depots to understand employee needs ensuring an inclusive approach and transparent communication, which facilitated frontline support for MHA roles.

What does the MHA role look like and what are the impacts?

Goals and Achievements

- The initial aim of MHA roles was suicide prevention, building upon existing MATES program and delivering opt-in training to employees.
- The second goal was improving mental health literacy, providing support mechanisms, and fostering open discussions on mental health. To do this the MHA's focused on reducing stigma and fostering a culture of open

dialogue.

- A Mental Health Action Plan was created to guide development and review of activities across all business areas.
- MHAs prioritised collaboration with HR team, aligning HR activities with Mental Health Action Plan.
- MHAs also played a key part in developing an incident response framework and addressing mental health challenges among work group leaders.
- Establishment of Peer Support Network to provide additional options for employees seeking support.

Day-to-day Activities

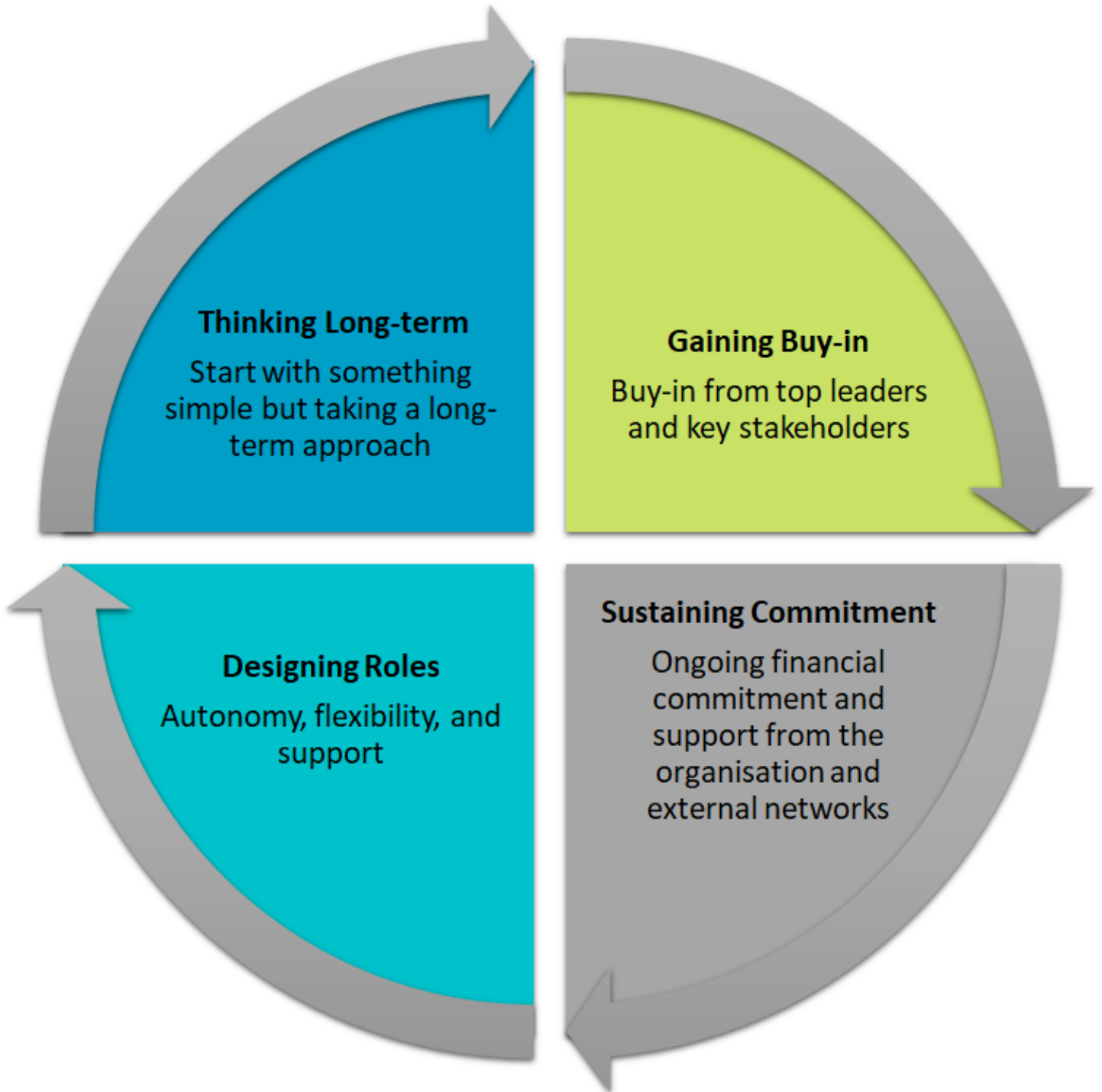
- State-wide support provided by MHAs through depot visits
- Respond to emergencies and provide ongoing engagement and support with employees and their colleagues, at multiple touchpoints.
- Designing and delivering a series of training programs to leaders and employees to enhance mental health awareness and responses to challenging situations.
- Complementary partnership between MHAs and HR team, with MHAs enabling HR to focus on core duties while providing generalist support.

Impact

- Increased employee mental health awareness and cultural change as reflected by surveys and recognitions from employees.
- External accolades to the organization and to the employees holding the MHA roles

Designing and sustaining MHAs for success: Key considerations for organisations

The introduction of MHA roles shows potential for addressing mental health challenges within organisations. Energy Queensland's experiences offer valuable insights on how to ensure the roles are a success. Some of the key factors to consider are highlighted below.



Starting simple and taking a long-term, evolutionary approach

- MHAs at Energy Queensland highlighted that a long-term perspective is important and that significant changes took years to materialise.
- The MHAs started with basic frameworks and gradually expanded, focusing on establishing a solid foundation for evolving strategies.

- Once the foundation had been laid they shifted focus from immediate concerns like suicide rates to broader goals such as normalising mental health conversations and reducing stigma.
- Ongoing data collection was highlighted as important so they could be pre-emptive in terms of areas requiring attention and also for making sure mental health initiatives were sustainable.
- The MHA's noted it was important to collaborate with HR departments as they play a crucial role in data collection and also HRM practices and processes.

Buy-in from senior executives and other key stakeholders:

- Strong understanding and support from senior executives and key stakeholders was pivotal for the establishment and sustainability of MHA roles.
- Continuous commitment from upper management, including monthly meetings with leaders and quarterly meetings with board members, ensured ongoing support and resource allocation.
- MHAs secured buy-in from the broader workforce and engaged collaboratively with unions. Their personal understanding of the work, organisation, and also mental health challenges, as well as relationships with the union, were key to getting this buy-in.
- Collaboration between management and unions assisted in the creation of MHA roles and ensured ongoing success through continued endorsement and support.

Long-term financial commitment and support:

- Sustainable financial commitment from senior leaders is crucial for the

success of MHA roles, with Energy Queensland allocating budget and resources for role creation and ongoing sustainability.

- Regular support sessions with external psychologists and Lived Experience networks are funded to ensure the wellbeing of MHAs.
- However, when financial constraints were felt, the MHA's took a more innovative approach, including in-house development of training and resources, and leveraging partnerships for ongoing support.
- Partnerships with organisations like MATES in Energy and Roses in the Ocean proved beneficial in addressing financial constraints and expanding support networks.

Autonomy and flexibility in role design:

- MHAs were empowered to autonomously craft their roles, allowing flexibility to work across multiple locations and collaborate with various organisational functions (such as HR).
- Proactive identification of problems and continuous improvement were facilitated by the autonomy granted to MHAs by top leaders.
- Flexibility and reasonable adjustments, such as working from home, adjusting working hours, and unlimited access to mental health support, are provided to support MHA wellbeing.
- Digital platforms and scalable solutions are explored for programs and training, helping to address any resource limitations and sustainability concerns.

Conclusion

The employment of MHA roles by Energy Queensland demonstrates how Lived Experience roles can be created and implemented outside of the Mental Health sector to effectively addresses mental health challenges within the workforce.

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