AUSTRALIAN CORPORATIONS

DOES CRISIS/VULNERABILITY/RISK RESPONSE TRAINING CONSTITUTE UNACCEPTABLE EXPOSURE TO TRAUMA OR IS IT A NECESSARY MITIGATION OF RISK?

Always wanting the best for our teams, there is one question that leaders across Operations, Risk, Compliance and other areas of the organisation often grapple with. Does training our frontline teams in response skills for those moments when customers are highly agitated, abusive or present as being at risk, expose our staff to unnecessary trauma, or is it that very training which will best protect our people in those moments of high stress?

Amendments to WHS/OHS regulations already in force, or imminent, across Australia, have now provided some much-needed clarity around that question.

In essence, the relevant amended Regulations now impose on every employer the obligation to 'manage and control' what the legislation refers to as Psychosocial Hazards and Risks.

Every customer-facing employee, whether specialised or frontline, will inevitably be exposed to certain Psychosocial Hazards during their workday which are impossible to eliminate completely (e.g. customers who are deeply distressed, angry, abusive, vulnerable or perhaps expressing thoughts of self-harm or suicide). The associated Psychosocial Risks to those employees include vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue and burnout.

The obligation to manage and control those Psychosocial Hazards and Risks means that, as an organisation and in consultation with our staff, we need to consider such things as:

- Systems of work
- Expectations and experiences of the role
- Whether our policies and processes support our teams or inadvertently create risk in and of themselves, and

- Whether our training supports our frontline teams with the skills to:
  i. <u>Respond</u> in moments of high stress in a way that is ethical, appropriate and effective.
  ii. <u>Maintain</u> the essential boundaries for the safety of the customer, the organisation, the broader team and, most particularly themselves.
  iii. <u>Understand</u> the ways in which they are able to reduce the impact on themselves of the customer's trauma, anger or distress.
  iv. <u>Apply</u> techniques to 'decompress' after a particularly confronting conversation and understand how, and to whom, to reach out if they are affected.

Providing our frontline teams with high quality and considered training which enables them to protect themselves, and work with the safety of both themselves and of the customer front of mind, is an essential tool in the management and control of the Psychosocial Hazards and Risks they face every day, as well as minimisation of those that are impossible to eliminate.

Of course, training in an issue such as self-harm/suicide <u>without</u> the necessary context of the three boundaries and ethical response skills to agitated or vulnerable customers generally, might have the unacceptable effect of both exposing staff to unnecessary trauma as well as increasing the risk to both them and their customer in the moments when support is most needed.

A consistent approach across all teams, whether they be frontline or more specialised, in engaging with all customers in a way that is based in respect and dignity (and complies with the extra care provisions of the Code of Practice when relevant) can only be of benefit to your team members as well as your customers.

Whilst it is essential that leaders do whatever possible to minimise unnecessary exposure to trauma for their staff, it is in fact the lack of appropriate training and skill development which inadvertently, but inevitably, results in that very exposure. WHS/OHS amended Regulations make the employers obligations in this regard clear.