

BUILDING ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY AND PROMOTING RESILIENCE – THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP

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Key Takeaways

- + **Workplace climate is a key determinant of organisational performance. Organisation leaders should monitor workplace climate and seek to enhance it wherever possible.**
- + **A positive workplace climate is fundamental to many critical business outcomes and can differentiate an outstanding organisation from a mediocre one.**
- + **It is possible to have a positive workplace climate in a difficult organisational culture and succeed, but if the workplace climate is poor it will negatively affect the organisation.**
- + **An organisation's leaders are the major influence in creating a positive working environment by creating a positive workplace climate which can affect the organisation in various ways.**
- + **Operational resilience is the ability of a business to withstand stresses and respond to unexpected events and there is emerging evidence that a positive workplace climate promotes and supports this resilience.**
- + **Psychological ill health preventative strategies should include a focus on generating and maintaining a strong workplace climate.**

BUILDING ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY AND PROMOTING RESILIENCE – THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP

Melissa Marot and Peter Dunn

Introduction

Building organisational capacity and promoting resilience are critical to sustaining organisational effectiveness over the long term. The approach to capacity building should be holistic and focus on meeting organisational performance needs, rather than solely building specific individual capability.

Creating a positive workplace climate is fundamental to providing a strong platform for business outcomes. A positive workplace climate will ultimately differentiate outstanding organisations from the mediocre. Leaders who understand the link between workplace climate and effectiveness are well positioned to proactively manage activities and behaviours that impact positively on climate and subsequently performance.

This paper explores the links between workplace climate, leadership and performance. It explores the notion and characteristics of workplace climate, and shows how effective leadership can both nurture and leverage off a positive workplace climate. Ultimately, effective leadership profoundly influences a positive workplace climate.

The Importance of Workplace Climate

A positive workplace climate is fundamental to many critical business outcomes and differentiates outstanding organisations from those that are mediocre. By building a positive workplace climate, a fundamental platform for developing individual leadership capability is achieved.

In both research and in practice, workplace climate has been closely related to organisational culture. There are differences, however. At the deepest level, organisational culture consists of a fundamental set of beliefs, values and assumptions that define the way the organisation conducts business (Pettigrew, 1990). Climate is the set of shared perceptions, behaviours and attitudes of 'what it's like to work around here' (Stringer, 2002). In practical terms, this means that it is possible to have a great departmental or team climate within a difficult organisational culture. However, if the workplace climate is damaging it is more likely that an unconstructive culture will develop in the long term.

Workplace climate is a powerful concept as it is easier to measure than culture and it provides a direct link between organisational effectiveness and individual motivation and behaviour. For example, leadership behaviours and managerial input, two elements that have been proven to have a direct impact on workplace climate, can also be quantified and measured. By bringing the spotlight onto workplace climate, leaders are made aware of the impact they have on their

organisation or teams, and become aware of the kinds of behaviour that encourages a constructive climate or may create a damaging climate.

In practice and research, general climate (i.e. overall climate) or specific aspects of climate (i.e. climate for change, quality, safety or innovation) have been utilised depending on their 'strategic usefulness'. Strategic usefulness is dictated by their alignment with performance and organisational strategy (Schneider, Bowen, Ehrhart, & Holcombe, 2000).

The link between workplace climate and performance has brought the spotlight on to how particular types of climate (such as those underpinning high standards, flexibility/adaptability, innovation, safety, etc) have led to particular types of performance outcomes, such as quality, change, discoveries or fewer injuries. Specific aspects of climate may be more critical for some organisations or teams than others. For example, a climate for innovation is critical for a research and development team in a biotechnology firm, whereas a climate for safety is most critical for an offshore oil and gas platform.

Workplace climate has been demonstrated to have a direct impact on critical organisational outcomes such as psychological health, recruitment and retention, safety, collaboration, quality, innovation, ethical decision-making, and resilience (see Figure 1 below). Workplace climate can be managed in proactive, specific and deliberate ways to improve performance. Climate has been defined and measured by many researchers, where specific conditions of climate have been identified to have a more direct influence on performance (Anderson & West, 1998; Litwin & Stringer, 1968; Moran & Volkwein, 1992; Schneider, 1990; Stringer, 2002). When these conditions exist, people are supported and motivated to do their best. These conditions will be further explored in the sections that follow. This suggests that if particular organisational practices are present in a work environment that creates a positive workplace climate, the more engaged and productive the workforce will be. In practical terms, an overall positive climate has been found to support a climate for safety, innovation, quality, etc. By bringing the spotlight on to specific aspects of climate, and proactively managing these aspects – performance for safety, innovation, collaboration, psychological health and so forth, can all be influenced.

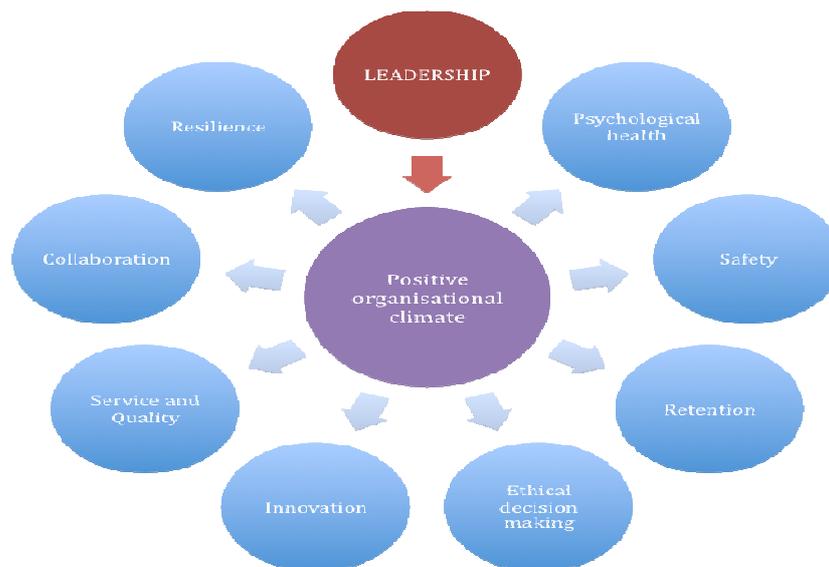


Figure 1: Positive workplace climate leads to strong performance in business critical areas such as psychological health, safety etc. Leadership behaviours have a direct impact on creating a positive workplace climate.

Workplace climate and Building Resilience

One of the major concerns for organisations today is developing an agile response to change that not only allows for survival, but also allows for growth. Organisational resilience is the ability to withstand stresses. Organisational resilience is demonstrated by the way change is transmitted throughout the organisation. In effect, resilience is a fundamental quality that is found in individuals, teams and the organisation as a whole. It is central to building positive responses to unexpected events.

The effects of poor organisational resilience are often easily identified and quantified. They are revealed by adverse events, mishaps and how the organisation, team or individuals react to such events. The positive face of resilience is somewhat hidden and can be defined by the organisation's intrinsic resilience to operational, internal and external hazards and other pressures. Some organisations are robust in dealing with these pressures; others are not.

There is emerging evidence that a positive workplace climate promotes and supports resilience across the organisation. It provides a critical foundation for individuals, teams and the organisation to work effectively through times of change, high pressure and stress.

Resilience depends on a framework that encompasses workplace climate. This framework should include a shared sense of organisational purpose and mission and high levels of communication have been consistently demonstrated to be critical to building resilience (Accar, William & Winfrey, 1994). The organisation must be able to recognise its challenges, its capability to meet challenges and have an awareness of how it needs to adapt to changing conditions. This requires strong leadership and commitment from organisational members. A positive workplace climate is characterised by engagement and enthusiasm, and a shared sense of common purpose. It is defined by a number of factors including innovation, flexibility, commitment and trust (Ashkanasy, Wilderom & Peterson, 2000). By focusing on developing a positive workplace climate, organisation, team and individual resilience is supported, and sustained.

Workplace climate – A Protective Factor for Psychological Health

The cause, prevalence and treatment of general psychological ill-health in the workplace, including post-traumatic mental health, are important issues for organisations such as the armed forces, police and emergency services. As a consequence of many years of research, the focus is now on prevention and the minimisation of long-term implications of work-related psychological injury. Protective factors against psychological ill health, such as workplace climate, have been the main focus at the organisational level.

The importance of workplace climate as a protective factor for psychological health in the workplace has been a critical issue across Australian workers compensation jurisdictions (Cotton, 2008). It has been found that a positive workplace climate has led to reduced workers compensation costs and claims while the poorer the workplace climate, the closer the link to compensation for both mental and physical illness (Cotton, 2008). Consequently, state/territory WorkCover authorities have sponsored numerous studies into building protective factors in the workplace. They have linked leadership behaviours with team climate and organisational support factors, and found that they provide an important buffer against workplace psychological injury (Hart & Cooper, 2001).

Other research has found that teams that have strong interlinked leadership and good team climate factors are those that are more resilient to psychological injury (Cotton, 2008). Recognising this, the Australian Public Service Commission (2006) promoted an organisational approach beyond that of traditional hazard identification and safety control by bringing the spotlight onto leadership behaviours, performance management and monitoring organisational health.

Identifying the link between leadership behaviours and workplace climate provides considerable potential for building protective factors and proactive measures that promote and support resilience across the organisation, the team and for the individual.

Workplace climate – A Climate for Safety

Over the last decade, technological and engineering advances and design improvements have helped to increase safety and reduce accident rates across a range of industries. Legislation, policies and procedures have also contributed to this outcome. However, it is now widely recognised that motivating the workforce to work safely, and encouraging workers to take ownership and responsibility of safety issues are both also just as critical (O’Dea & Flin, 2001). Indeed, safety issues may be more likely to be related to human behaviour than technical or procedural issues.

In healthcare and hospital settings, researchers have shown that a climate for safety has a direct impact on safety behaviour, which in turn impacts on safety performance (Flin, Burns, Mearns & Yule, 2006; Neal & Griffin, 2002). Based on this, others have extended safety climate measures into the nuclear and chemical industry (Silva, Lima & Baptista, 2004) where they were able to characterise the safety climate in a way where it was possible to identify strengths and weaknesses at a specific level. This provided the opportunity for targeted and specific training on improving safety behaviours.

Neal and Griffin (2002) also demonstrated the critical role of supportive leadership in the promotion of a positive climate for workplace safety, individual motivation and general conscientiousness. The link between leadership behaviours and a safety climate has been demonstrated in a number of research projects that have been conducted across countries and industries. For example, the leadership behaviours and attitude of site managers in the offshore oil and gas industry had a significant impact on motivating safety behaviours in staff and creating a climate for safety. Those with a directive style of leadership were said to have overestimated their ability to influence and motivate the workforce, and critical aspects of safety behaviour. In contrast, the leader who spent more time communicating with the workforce created a much more favourable environment for optimum safety performance (O’Dea & Flin, 2001).

Workplace climate – A Climate for Collaboration

The capacity for collaboration between teams, organisations and sectors is now considered critical in government and commercial organisations alike. The ‘whole-of-government’ approach to policy development and the need to navigate an organisation through a turbulent and high-pressure environment has confirmed the need to build collaborative capability across and between organisations (Marot et al, 2005). While well-designed organisational processes, information-sharing software, and communication processes improve organisational effectiveness in collaboration, knowledge management and sharing, even the more carefully designed systems and processes do not help if the willingness to collaborate does not exist.

There are specific aspects of workplace climate that influence behaviours and the willingness of people to collaborate with others. Both research and practice have shown that there are core aspects of a collaborative climate that improve organisational and team effectiveness (Marot et al, 2005; Urch-Druskat & Wolff, 2001). These are levels of trust and commitment, shared purpose, values and vision, leadership behaviours, and the willingness to share knowledge.

Workplace climate – A Climate for Innovation

In today's economy, innovation is propelled by the demands of increasingly competitive markets and the needs of organisations to improve their competitive advantage in these markets. Furthermore, innovation and creativity are more business critical for some organisations than others. For example, the capacity to innovate is critical for a research and development team in biotechnology (Agrell and Gustafson, 1994; Marot, 2005). Innovation is also essential in government policy-making in difficult areas such as the environment and water management.

A discerning workplace climate that supports innovation is essential for organisational success. Research has shown that there are a number of dimensions of climate that encourage innovation such as trust and openness, challenge and involvement, risk-taking, support and freedom to innovate (Isaksen & Lauer, 2002). A climate for innovation has also been linked to performance measured in terms of innovative output in the team environment (West, 1990). This link between team climate, innovation and output has been demonstrated in many studies, encompassing many industries, across many different cultures (Agrell & Gustafson, 1994; Anderson & West, 1998; Bain, Mann, & Pirola-Merlo, 2001; Kivimaki & Elovainio, 1999).

Workplace climate – A Climate for Quality and Service

Organisations are increasingly discovering that quality management is more about cultural change and improving the workplace climate for quality and service than any specific practices. There has been a breadth of research pointing to cultural factors that impact on quality and service, however there is now emerging evidence that specific aspects of climate have a more immediate impact. These are aspects of workplace climate that provide specific levers for supporting change in quality and service (Michela & Burke, 2000; Schneider, 2000). There is a strong correlation between a positive climate for quality and service and high performance in service oriented organisations where customer or client satisfaction was critical to organisational success (Schneider, 2000). As a consequence, leaders who understand the nature and management of climate are well positioned to accomplish the organisation-wide changes necessary to improve quality and service in their organisations.

Research in healthcare has established clear links between the use of multidisciplinary healthcare teams and improved patient care (West et al., 2002). Hence, it is critical to highlight issues of team climate and leadership processes in health care contexts. A positive climate for quality of care has been associated with superior care, positive patient evaluations, and self reported innovation and effectiveness (Bower, Campbell, Bojke & Sibbald, 2003). Moreover, research has shown that there appear to be links between leadership clarity, clear team objectives, high levels of participation, commitment to excellence and support for innovation (West et al., 2003). These links have been critical for performance outcomes of innovation and improving quality and service in, for example, multidisciplinary healthcare teams.

Workplace climate – A Climate for Ethical Decision Making

Ethical conduct, and ethical decision-making has arguably never been more critical for organisations. The advent of information technology and public scrutiny of government and commercial organisations alike has brought the spotlight on ethical decision making-processes, which can take place throughout an organisation. Issues around ethical decision-making were highlighted in the media coverage of the fall of global corporate giants during the recent 'Global Financial Crisis'.

Workplace climate supporting ethical behaviour and decision-making has an impact on organisational outcomes, even impacting on outcomes that do not have an explicit ethical component. The perception of what ethical behaviour is, and how ethical issues should be managed, are both aspects of a positive climate that promotes ethical behaviour across an organisation. Leadership plays a critical role in establishing a climate that is based on ethical values and there are a number of mechanisms that leaders can use to transmit values and create a climate that promotes ethical conduct (Grojean, Resick, Dickson & Smith, 2004). For example, clarity of direction, trust and commitment, and a sense of responsibility are all factors that promote a climate conducive to ethical behaviour in the organisation. A climate that promotes ethical decision-making is therefore a climate that encompasses a broader set of dimensions where organisational members perceive clarity of purpose, commitment to organisational values, and a sense of standards and responsibility for ethical conduct.

Workplace climate – A Climate for Personnel Retention

Retention of personnel has become a critical issue for many organisations. Building employee commitment for the long term, and creating a positive environment for a work-life balance has become a critical focus for many organisations. Employee commitment is essentially the strength of an individual's identification and involvement with, their employer. It is seen as the extent to which members identify with organisational goals and values, show a willingness to invest effort in work, and participate in organisational decision-making.

Defence and police forces have turned their attention to the management of retention across the globe, not least due to the complexity and high tempo of the contemporary military and policing environment, an environment where there is an additional component of both uniformed and civilian personnel. Of particular interest has been the application of workplace climate and leadership to organisational effectiveness, retention and psychological health across both the civilian and uniformed workforces. In their study of building commitment across civilian staff and police officers in the British police force, Dick and Metcalf (2001) bring attention to the influence of leadership behaviours and the importance of building a positive workplace climate, encouraging organisational commitment and building loyalty to the single police force across the civilian and uniformed workforces.

The link between leadership behaviours, workplace climate, organisational effectiveness and retention has been proven to be equally important in defence forces. Jans and Schmidtchen (2002) focus on how middle-level leaders (commanding officers and staff directors) and junior leaders can create workplace climates that sustain organisational effectiveness and quality of life at work. The operational and tactical skills employed by combat leaders in times of crisis are a direct and important form of leadership. Equally important are the indirect activities that create a 'unit/subunit/small group' climate to facilitate performance and development in the medium to long

term. Attention should be focused on ensuring that officers and senior non-commissioned officers have a thorough understanding of workplace climate and what and how leadership activities impact upon it. By understanding the implications of creating a poor workplace climate and the link between leadership behaviours and workforce retention, the psychological health of servicemen and women under their direct command is managed better.

The Importance of Leadership

Leaders are a major influence in creating a positive working environment. Research has comprehensively linked leadership to workplace climate and performance, where specific behaviours have contributed to a range of outcomes, such as safety, innovation, and retention. The Australian Public Service Commission (2006) found that an organisational approach to improving climate, such as focusing on leadership behaviours, performance management and monitoring organisational health, has resulted in a more positive work environment. A better workplace climate results in better safety practices, decreased absenteeism and staff turnover, improved well-being and organisational performance.

Researchers and practitioners have identified specific leadership qualities that have the most influence on workplace climate. Stringer (2002) identifies these leadership practices as: a commitment to achieving goals; clarity over responsibilities; encouraging innovation balanced with calculated risk taking; setting challenging goals; conducting team meetings so that trust is built; and encouraging participation in decision-making. These leadership behaviours can include directive or coercive behaviours, visionary behaviours, supportive leadership, and adaptive leadership behaviours. Specific leadership behaviours have been linked to specific dimensions of climate. For example, West et al, (2002) suggest that clarity of leadership and participative behaviours encourage a climate for trust and innovation. Leadership behaviours and workplace climate dimensions have been measured in many ways. These include specific measures of climate such as a climate for innovation (West, 2002), a climate for safety (Neal & Griffin, 2002), or overall measures of climate such as Stringers six dimensions of climate (2002) and the related Hay Group six dimensions of climate (Anderson & Zhu, 2002).

Context plays a significant role in all aspects of leadership. In other words, a leader's behaviour must adapt to the requirements of the situation. Should they focus on innovation or safety? How should they respond to an emergency situation while ensuring the delivery of 5-star customer service? It is essential for leaders to take stock of the circumstances, assess how reasonable people would respond to the demands of the situation, and use leadership behaviour(s) that will best achieve the desired, or necessary, outcomes.

Overall, research into the links between leadership styles and workplace climate suggests that there is no such thing as a 'bad' leadership style. Rather, there are situations where the overuse of a particular leadership style can damage workplace climate. A leader using particular leadership behaviours to excess, or at the exclusion of all other styles, can create a climate detrimental to the purpose of the group. For example, a focus on directive behaviours is important in a policing environment in the field, however, such a style would be detrimental to a research team where innovation is likely to be more productive. Participative behaviours have been found to be critical for building safety behaviours on an oilrig in the long term, yet would be detrimental in an Accident and Emergency environment on a Saturday night.

The ability to identify the link between leadership behaviours, workplace climate and business critical performance outcomes enables organisations to provide targeted leadership development activities. The organisation is thus able to focus on the leadership behaviours that have a significant impact on critical performance outcomes.

Training in leadership behaviours and how they link to workplace climate would provide the opportunity for leaders to understand how their own leadership styles and capabilities match against those that are needed for their own organisation.

The link between leadership behaviours and workplace climate provides a leverage point for deliberate action to be taken to improve weak or unsatisfactory workplace climates. Researched and tested tools to measure leadership behaviours and workplace climates (both general and specific), are available. These tools show that links to performance outcomes, including innovation, safety, and organisational resilience over the long term, are closely aligned to leadership behaviours and workplace climate.

Recommended Action – Leadership is the Key

The results of workplace climate diagnostic work have revealed key insights into what creates a good climate for specific requirements such as innovation, safety, service and quality (see Anderson & West, 1998; Ashkanasy, Wilderom & Peterson, 2000). It was clear in numerous studies that more general aspects of workplace climate such as responsibility, standards, clarity, and commitment have enabled a specific climate for innovation or safety (Ashkanasy, Wilderom & Peterson, 2000). General aspects of climate have been successfully evaluated in organisational settings to identify strengths and weaknesses at the more specific level – safety training in healthcare for example (Silva et al., 2004). Factors such as training, infrastructure, equipment, resources, and participation in decision-making all contribute positively to building these more general aspects of workplace climate.

The need to focus on building a positive climate in organisations has been propelled by demands of increasingly turbulent conditions and the need for organisations to find stability in these conditions. The ability to identify organisational factors that support positive climates has become more critical than ever before. Time and time again, one of the most influential factors on workplace climate has been found to be leadership practices across the organisation.

To effectively build the capacity of organisations, there is strong evidence to show that one should begin by understanding the concept of workplace climate and to be able to identify the key components or characteristics of a successful workplace climate. This paper has undertaken to identify these, and to stress the importance of leadership in implementing and nurturing a positive workplace climate. Once these components, and how they relate to workplace climate, are mastered, leaders can use them to improve their leadership skills to ensure improved organisational performance.

About the Authors

Melissa Marot is a Senior Consultant with Noetic Solutions. She is a psychologist with international experience in the areas of organisational, clinical and neurological psychology. As a consultant, academic and business owner, she has experience in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia.

Melissa's consulting expertise is built on experience in the public sector as well as the private sector, including with commercial and not-for-profit organisations. She has developed and facilitated solutions to build organisational capacity and resilience across both these sectors. She has specialist expertise in translating strategic intent and change initiatives into practical solutions to improve organisational effectiveness across teams and organisations – ranging from the Board to front-line people management.

Using both clinical and organisational knowledge, she has facilitated programs, provided debriefing/coaching services, and utilised a wide array of diagnostic tools to help build resilience and improve personal and organisational effectiveness in high-pressure and complex environments.

She has authored peer-reviewed publications and speaks at conferences and workshops on a regular basis.

Peter Dunn is a Principal Consultant with Noetic Solutions. He has many years of experience in leadership positions in both the public and private sectors. Throughout his career, Peter has focused on building the capacity of individuals, organisations and communities. This has led him to examine the applied aspects of leadership, rather than simply the theoretical elements of leadership.

Peter's experience spans a career in the Australian Army where he retired as a Major General after many commands, and with combat experience in the Vietnam War. He then enjoyed a career in the public service, completing this part of his career as the Chief Executive of a statutory authority. He then moved to the private sector where he has been a Chief Executive Officer and head of the Canberra operations for a global consulting firm specialising in leadership development. Peter joined Noetic Solutions in 2010.

Peter regularly speaks at conferences and runs capacity building programs and workshops.

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