

Something's Not Right

A LEADER'S GUIDE TO STEPPING IN EARLY



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CHANGE TOMORROW

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You've noticed something – a change in energy, a withdrawal, a tension that wasn't there before. You might not be able to name it exactly. But your instinct is telling you something is off.

That instinct matters. Research consistently shows that early leader-initiated intervention – before a concern becomes a formal issue or a claim – produces significantly better outcomes for people, teams, and organisations. The moment you notice something is the right moment to act. Not to diagnose. Not to fix. Just to check in.

WHY EARLY INTERVENTION MATTERS

Beyond Blue's research into workplace mental health (2014, updated 2022) found that workers who received early support from their manager reported better recovery outcomes and greater return-to-work success than those who waited for formal processes. Safe Work NSW's Code of Practice reinforces that managing psychosocial risk includes identifying early warning signs and responding proactively – not reactively. The leader's role in this is central and irreplaceable.

Signs Something May Be Off

These are not diagnostic criteria – they are prompts to pay attention. Any one of them warrants a check-in.

➤ A team member has gone quiet or seems withdrawn

➤ Performance has shifted without an obvious reason

➤ You've noticed increased conflict or friction between people

➤ Someone seems flat, disengaged, or unusually stressed

➤ Sick leave or lateness has increased

➤ Someone has flagged a concern – directly or indirectly

➤ There's a tension in the team you can't quite name

➤ A team member has mentioned something is going on for them



Before You Step In

Go one-to-one

This conversation is not for the team setting. Find a private, neutral space – not your office if that feels formal.

Pick your moment

Not mid-task or mid-crisis. A quiet moment, ideally when you've already had some natural interaction that day.

Know your role

You are not a counsellor. Your job is to open the door, listen, and connect them to support if needed.

The Conversation

Using OARS

OARS – Open questions, Affirmations, Reflective listening, Summarising – are the four core skills of Motivational Interviewing. Applied here, they give you a structure to move from opening the conversation through listening and acknowledging to agreeing on a way forward, without taking over or making assumptions.

OARS

MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING

Developed by **Miller and Rollnick** (1991, updated 2023), Motivational Interviewing (MI) is an evidence-based communication approach that emphasises autonomy, empathy, and non-directive listening. Research shows that MI-informed conversations are significantly more effective at building trust and motivating change than directive or advice-giving approaches - making OARS particularly well-suited to sensitive one-to-one conversations where a leader needs to draw out rather than direct.



OBSERVE

Name what you've noticed (without assuming)

Start with a calm observation, not a question. This is intentional – in Motivational Interviewing, opening with an observation rather than a direct question reduces defensiveness and gives the person more control over how much they share. Keep it factual and caring.

TRY

"I've noticed you've seemed a bit quieter than usual lately - I just wanted to check in and see how you're going."



AFFIRM

Ask and then listen

Ask an open question and give them space. An affirmation here – naming something genuine you appreciate about them – lowers defensiveness and makes it safer to be honest.

TRY

"How are you actually going - not just work-wise, but generally? You've always been someone who puts a lot into this team, and I want to make sure you're okay."



REFLECT

Acknowledge what you hear

Reflect back what you've heard before moving toward solutions. You don't need to have the answers – what matters is that they feel heard, not managed.

TRY

"That sounds really difficult. What I'm hearing is *[reflect their words back]*. Is that right?"



SUMMARISE

Agree on a next step together

Summarise what's been shared, then move to a next step together. Follow their lead – autonomy in the next step increases the likelihood they'll follow through.

TRY

"So from what you've shared, it sounds like *[summary]*. What would feel most helpful for you right now?"

If They Disclose Something Serious

If a team member discloses something that suggests they may be at risk – to themselves or others – your role shifts. Stay calm. Thank them for telling you. Do not leave them alone if you are concerned for their immediate safety. Connect them to professional support right away. You don't need to manage this alone.

Lifeline: 13 11 14

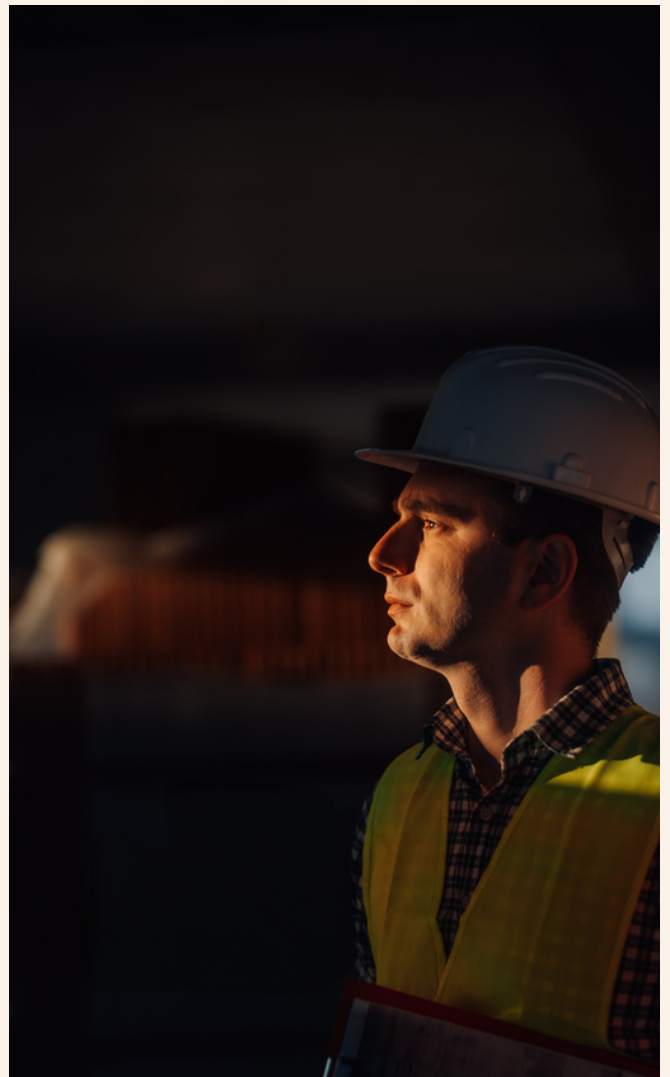
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Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636

You should also consult your own organisation's internal support such as an EAP Provider, HR Contact, and follow any internal reporting processes in place.

What to Avoid

- ⊘ Minimise what they've shared (*"Everyone feels that way"*)
- ⊘ Jump to solutions before they feel heard
- ⊘ Promise confidentiality if that may not be possible
- ⊘ Push them to share more than they're ready to
- ⊘ Ignore it and hope it resolves itself
- ⊘ Handle it entirely alone – use your support systems too



What Are Psychosocial Hazards?

Under NSW's *Work Health and Safety Regulation 2025*, employers have a legal duty to identify and manage psychosocial hazards – the conditions at work that can cause psychological harm.

SafeWork NSW's Code of Practice identifies the following hazards:

- 1 Role overload**
- 2 Role underload**
- 3 Exposure to traumatic events**
- 4 Role conflict or lack of role clarity**
- 5 Low job control**
- 6 Conflict or poor workplace relationships**
- 7 Poor support from supervisors and managers**
- 8 Poor co-worker support**
- 9 Workplace violence**
- 10 Bullying**
- 11 Harassment (including sexual harassment)**
- 12 Inadequate reward and recognition**
- 13 Hazardous physical working environments**
- 14 Remote or isolated work**
- 15 Poor procedural justice (processes for making decisions)**
- 16 Poor organisational change consultation**



The conversation you just had is part of your responsibility to proactively identify these hazards – and your willingness to have it is itself a protective factor for your team.

After the Conversation

Check in again

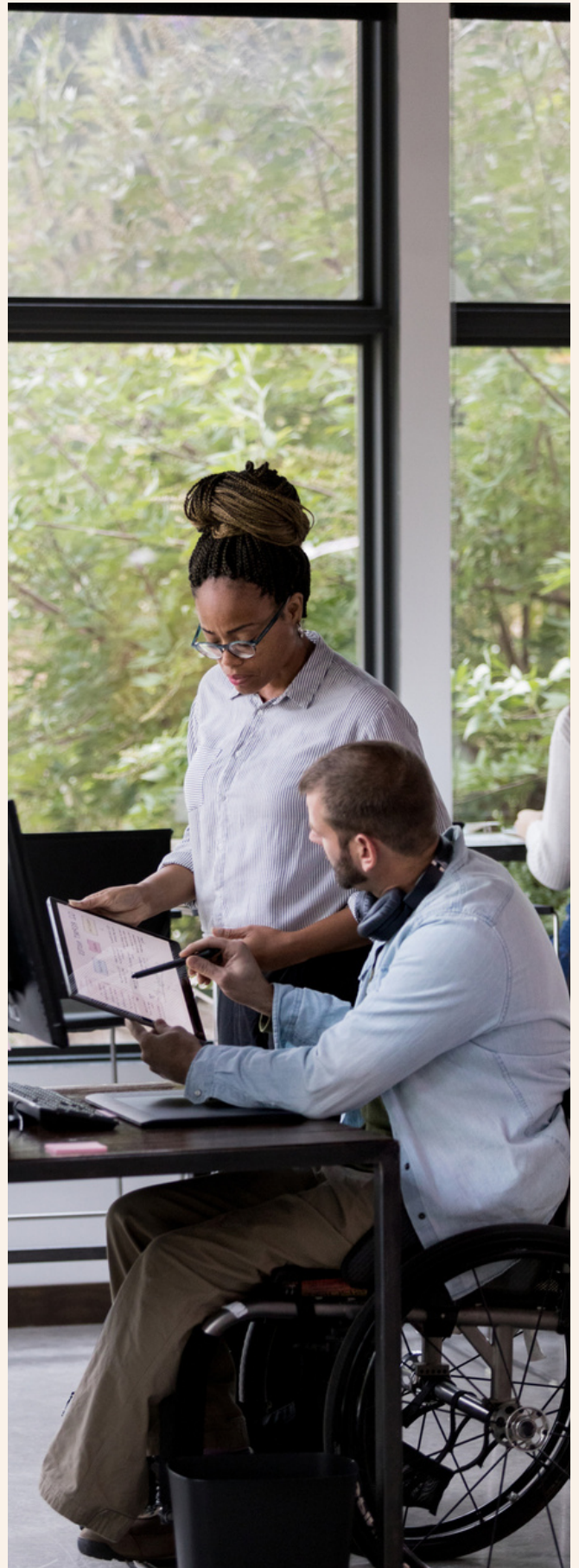
A brief follow-up – even just “How are you going?” – signals that the conversation mattered and wasn’t a one-off.

Look after yourself

These conversations can be heavy. Debrief with your own manager or HR if you need to. You matter in this too.

Know your boundaries

You’re not expected to manage this alone. Know your organisation’s EAP, HR, and escalation processes before you need them.





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