Preventing and reducing workplace stress: A pilot study involving two frontline human service organisations

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Pilot project – Background

- **Human and economic costs of chronic job stress**
  - Burnout, work-life conflict, sleep disorders, high accident risk
  - Increased labour turnover, error rates, client dissatisfaction, impaired performance
- **Frontline human services vulnerable to high levels of job stress**
  - Five occupations with the highest frequency rates for mental stress claims are all from human services (Safe Work Aust 2013)
    - Police, prison officers, paramedics, welfare & community workers, social workers
- **Key limitations of existing job stress intervention research**
  - Focus much more on intervention effectiveness rather than process & contextual factors that contribute to effectiveness
  - Little known about how to plan, implement & evaluate work-based stress prevention programs, especially in high demand – low resource working environments

Pilot project – Background

- **Project Aim**
  - Demonstrate the types of strategies organisations can use when identifying and addressing the work-based sources of job stress
- **Project partners & participating work groups**
  - Victoria Police
    - Junior officers based in two, 24-hr police stations
    - Consist of 8-10 sergeants supervising 25-30 junior officers
  - EACH Social and Community Health
    - Counselling Services, consisting of….
      - Eight teams of counsellors (e.g., drug & alcohol, gambling, youth, victims of crime) each with approx 10 members

Pilot project – Background

- **Project consisted of three phases**
  - Initial needs assessment & contextual analysis
  - Strategy development
  - Intervention implementation & evaluation
- **Timeline**
  2012 – 2014

Guiding Framework

Noblet & LaMontagne, 2009

Intervention Aims

1 Asses the extent to which a work-based stress prevention/reduction program can enhance psychosocial working conditions and health outcomes among frontline human service personnel

2 Understand the context and process-related factors that can inhibit or enhance intervention effectiveness
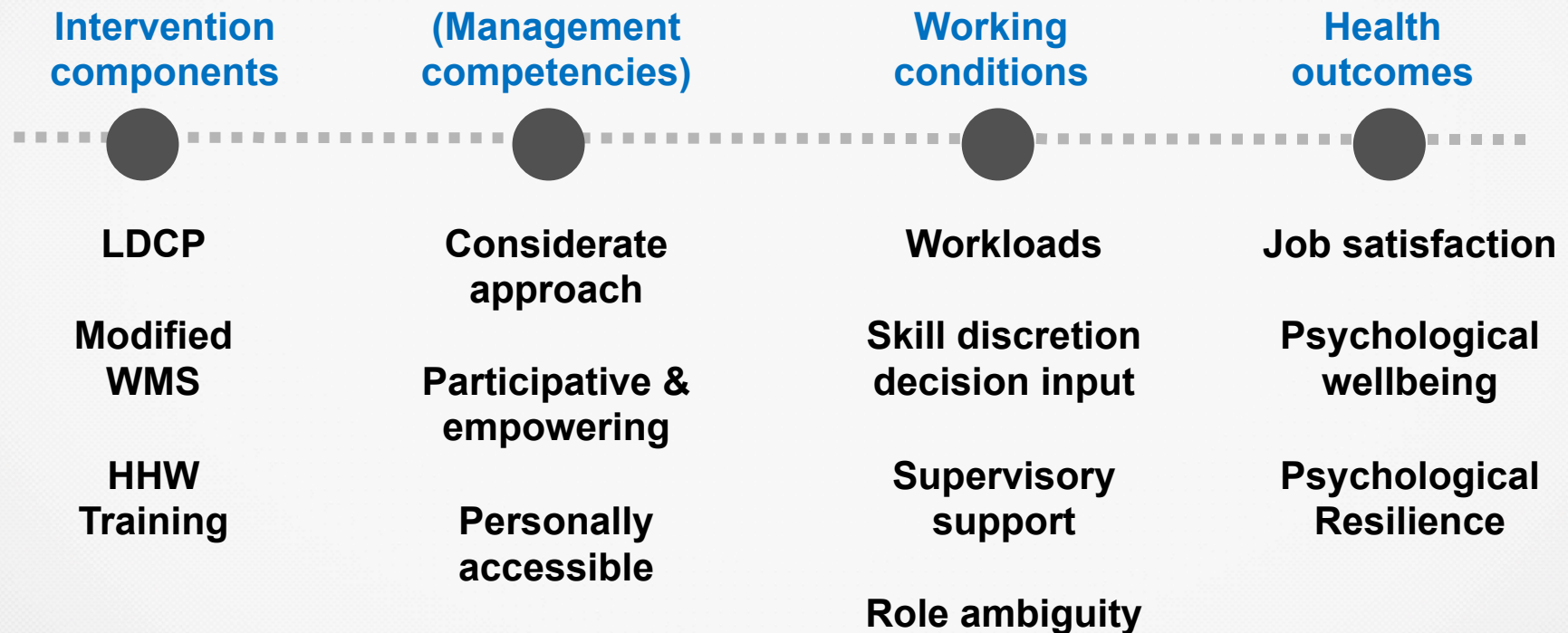
Pilot project – Intervention

- **Components of intervention – Victoria Police**
  - Competency-based supportive leadership development and coaching program (LDCP) for sergeants
    - 180degree assessment of the sergeants leadership competencies
    - 8-week coaching program (one per fortnight)
  - Modified online workload management system
    - Newly introduced system that had been used primarily to track correspondence
    - Expanded to provide an early-warning system for officers who may need additional support
  - 'Handling Heavy Workloads' training
    - Aims to help junior officers better manage large volumes of paperwork

Pilot project – Intervention

- **Components of intervention – EACH counsellors**
  - Competency-based supportive leadership development and coaching program (LDCP) for team leaders
    - 360degree assessment of the team leaders' competencies
    - 8-week coaching program (one per fortnight)
  - Resiliency workshops
    - Included strategies for enhancing Individual and team-based resilience
  - Wellbeing day
    - Aimed at promoting positive mental wellbeing, preventing vicarious trauma & self-care

Intervention **Logic -** Victoria Police

Intervention components	(Management competencies)	Working conditions	Health outcomes
LDCP	Considerate approach	Workloads	Job satisfaction
Modified WMS	Participative & empowering	Skill discretion decision input	Psychological wellbeing
HHW Training	Personally accessible	Supervisory support	Psychological Resilience
		Role ambiguity	

Intervention
Leadership Development & Workloads Management

HHW Training

Modified WMS

Leadership Development & Coaching

LDCP
180ºassessment
8 weeks coaching

Workload Management System
Recently introduced
Aided early warning

Heavy Workloads Training
Existing program
with limited reach

Approach

✔ Dual work-worker strategies

✔ Participatory action research

✔ Internal capacity building

Station 1 - T1 – T3 Survey Results

Outcomes	T1	T2	T1-T2 Δ*	T3	T2-T3 Δ*
Management competencies					
Managing emotions	70	76	+6	83	+7
Considerate approach	68	74	+6	83	+9
Participative & empowering	71	76	+5	81	+5
Proactive work management	69	75	+6	84	+9
Empathetic management	70	74	+4	84	+10
Personally accessible	71	81	+10	83	+2
Psychosocial working conditions					
Workload	37.6	35.1	-2.5	36.0	+0.9
Job control	33.3	33.6	+0.3	33.4	-0.2
Supervisory support	45.8	48.6	+2.8	44.5	-4.1
Role ambiguity	16.6	15.9	-0.7	17.1	+1.2
Health and wellbeing outcomes					
Job satisfaction	74.6	78.8	+4.2	72.5	-6.3
Psychological wellbeing	24.9	24.3	-0.6	26.5	+2.1
Psychological resilience	24.2	24.9	+0.7	24.0	-0.9

Station 1 process evaluation - Summary of results

Positives
-Sergeants feel more competent & less stressed
-Members feel more supported
-Opportunities for trialing new behaviours, reflect & gain f/back

Negatives
-Group 180 assessments
-Lack of individual accountability
-Mixed response to internal coaches
-Program too short

Barriers
-Lack of time to trial behaviours
-Initial skepticism
-Senior sergeants not involved initially

Enablers
-High level buy-in (int/ext)
-Cohesiveness of station
-Facilitator's credibility & approach

Intervention – Changes

- Provide sergeants with individualized rather than group-based feedback;
- Require each sergeant to develop an individual learning plan
- Develop a coaching contract that articulates the responsibilities that the sergeant and the coach have to each other during program
- Involve the sergeants' direct supervisors (senior sergeants) in the program
  - attend the initial workshop
  - provide more info on how the program is designed to strengthen managerial competencies
  - ask them to provide regular feedback
- Ensure each sergeant has only one coach

Station 2 – T1-T3 Survey Results

Outcomes	T1	T2	T1-T2 Δ*	T3	T2-T3 Δ*
Management competencies					
Managing emotions	84.7	86.0	+1.3	na	na
Considerate approach	82.6	84.3	+1.7	na	na
Participative & empowering	80.3	81.4	+1.1	na	na
Proactive work management	77.6	80.3	+2.7	na	na
Empathetic management	81.9	84.9	+3.0	na	na
Personally accessible	78.3	82.1	+3.8	na	na
Psychosocial working conditions					
Workloads	42.1	43.8	+1.7	42.3	-1.5
Job control	33.3	33.7	+0.4	33.3	-0.4
Supervisory support	47.2	48.7	+1.5	46.2	-2.5
Role ambiguity	15.6	16.0	+0.4	16.7	+0.7
Health and wellbeing outcomes					
Job satisfaction	77.1	83.5	+6.4	77.3	-6.3
Psychological wellbeing	25.4	27.6	+2.2	23.0	-4.56
Psychological resilience	25.5	25.9	+0.4	25.2	-0.73

Discussion

- Victoria Police
  - Signs that integrated LDCP and WLM can be effective

  - However initial improvement wasn't sustained after 6mths

  - Turnover of sergeants in both stations a key contributor to T2-T3 reductions

  - Support for individual rather than group-based leadership development

EACH Community Health – T1-T3 Results

Outcomes	T1	T2	T1-T2 Δ*	T3	T2-T3 Δ*
Management competencies					
Managing emotions	81	72	-9	na	na
Considerate approach	82	77	-5	na	na
Participative & empowering	85	83	-2	na	na
Proactive work management	83	82	-1	na	na
Empathetic management	87	82	-5	na	na
Personally accessible	84	83	-1		
Psychosocial working conditions					
Workloads	13.6	15.7	+1.7	13.2	-2.5
Job control	11.3	11.4	+0.1	10.8	-0.6
Supervisory support	14.8	14.3	-0.5	14.4	+0.1
Community health stressors	60.0	66.5	+6.5	61.2	-5.3
Health and wellbeing outcomes					
Job satisfaction	89.5	85.0	-4.9	88.8	+3.8
Psychological wellbeing	23.7	24.9	+1.2	21.9	-3.0
Intention to quit	8.41	9.8	+1.4	9.5	-0.3

Discussion

- EACH
  - Indications that significant organisational change and competing demands initially experienced by team leaders were a barrier to developing & applying new behaviours
    - Merger with neighbouring CHS
    - Re-tendering process
  - However also evidence of recovery during the T2-T3 period
  - Recovery aided by booster sessions and continued involvement in LDCP after project had been completed

Limitations

- Design limitations
  - Quasi-experimental design means we cannot infer cause and effect
  - Small samples (and high turnover within samples) made it very difficult to identify significant changes
    - Both above highlight importance of NHMRC tiral
- Small study focusing on one sector with tailored interventions
  - Involving two very different organisatons enhances broader relevance of the results although transferability still limited
- Relatively high levels of readiness in participating organisations
  - Strong support from leaders within and outside participating work groups

Concluding comments

- Intervention sustainability difficult to achieve in a dynamic, high demand-low resource, human services environment
  - Recognising and capitalising on existing resources critical for maintaining improvements
- Study reinforces the importance of supervisory support and leadership development
  - Especially during first iteration of an ongoing series of planning, implementing, evaluating cycles
- Support for the action learning and capacity building initiatives more in the qualitative responses rather than survey results

Thank you!
Any Questions?