Centre for Inclusive Employment & Disability Employment Australia

Lunch & Learn Session | Wednesday, 9th September 2026

Leading for Psychological Safety

Speaker: Kelly Mason, CEO, Bounce Global

Host: Sally Karandews, IEA Policy Manager, DEA

SALLY: Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to this week's Lunch & Learn. It's lovely to have you all here with us. My name is Sally and I am the IEA Policy Manager here at Disability Employment Australia and I'll be hosting today's session. I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which each of us are dialling in from today. For me that's the land of the Darkinjung people and I pay my respect to Elders past and present and recognise that this is land that was never ceded. The Lunch & Learn workshops are delivered in partnership between the Centre for Inclusive Employment and Disability Employment Australia. The Centre for Inclusive Employment supports providers by collating and sharing practical resources, tools and training to support the delivery of high-quality employment services. And Disability Employment Australia is a national peak for employment service providers. Today we do have captions available. Renae will post a link to accessing those - details on how to access those in the chat. There will also be the opportunity to ask questions, both during the session and at the end. So if you do have any questions or comments you can pop them into the Q&A session - section. We'll also be monitoring the chat for them as well. Today's session will be recorded and the recording will be made available after the session along with any presentations and links or resources that are shared as well. Our session today is leading for psychological safety and it's brought to us by Kelly Mason who is the CEO of Bounce Global. Kelly has an extensive career in leadership and developing workforce capability and comes to us with a wealth of knowledge on this particular subject so I will hand over to Kelly.

KELLY: Thank you so much, Sally. And thank you, everyone, for being with us

today during this lunchtime session. So today I really wanted to talk about the psychological safety and the importance of leadership in this space. One thing I wanted to mention initially is that Bounce Global, those of you that may know our organisation, we have actually been operating for 20 years, primarily servicing and supporting the employment services sector. There's a few names that I recognise that are on this session so thank you very much for joining us today. Bounce, we are not experts in the legal side of the psychological safety that we know that we're all very familiar with. At the moment it's quite a topical topic for everybody in business, not just in our world of employment services, but it is something that we are very, very committed to in and around the leadership behaviours that need to be present in terms of mitigating some of those risks that you might have in your workplace around this area. So what I really wanted to delve into today is around what is the current - what is psychological safety when we think about employment services. And I think it isn't just about protecting employees in employment services it actually directly influences the quality of support participants receive. When staff feel safe, valued and clear about expectations they are better able to build trust, have meaningful coaching conversations and support people into sustainable employment. So it has that flow-on effect as well. So what is the reality for business or for providers? So psychological safety is often compliance-led, not culture led. And what I mean by that is that on paper psychological safety is a priority and it's driven by legislation, it's driven by rising claims and increased awareness but in practice many organisations are still at a very early or reactive stage to it. So most organisations are responding because they have to, not because they deeply understand it. So the policies exist, risk registers will include psychosocial hazards, training is rolled out leaders don't consistently model safe behaviours. Psychological safety isn't embedded in day-to-day decisions. So leaders become underprepared and it is one of the biggest gaps we're seeing across organisations. So leaders are expected to manage mental health conversations, identify burn-out, bullying and stress risks, create safe team environments but many of them have not been trained on how to do this and they default to performance management over support. So avoiding those difficult conversations altogether, and I'm sure we've all got examples of where that's occurred. So high pressure environments are still the norm, we know that and we can see that. So those high-pressure environments and we know at employment services a very high pressure environment a lot of the time and we know that that's there across many of the sectors. We also know that reporting at times does not feel safe. So even where systems exist staff don't trust that raising issues will lead to change. So there's fear of repercussions or

being labelled difficult. Previous complaints might not have gone nowhere so people choose not to raise things. So that's still what the reality is in business in general. There's data. Data does exist but it's not used well. And many organisations do collect employment or engagement surveys, pulse checks, exit data but those insights are rarely translated into action. Leaders aren't held accountable for change and trends are ignored until there's a crisis point. So this is not about saying whether you're doing things right or wrong but these are just some of the realities in terms of what's happening in business. There is genuine intent but it's fragmented in its execution and this is important. Most organisations care and they're trying to respond but their efforts are often siloed. So sometimes what we're finding in the organisations that we work with is that psychological safety is being seen as a HR or P&C area issue or problem or thing to deal with. It's not clear in terms of the ownership across the organisation. And there's not an integrated strategy that's happening across organisations as well. Sometimes we see wellbeing is...for psychological safety. So organisations will invest in EA programs, EAP, yoga sessions or resilience workshops but they neglect work design, leadership behaviours, that role clarity, job demand versus capacity. So it's just around relooking at how is your organisation, no matter what role you are within the organisation but how is your organisation looking at this more broadly. So why do we need to manage psychosocial hazards in the workplace? I think maybe you're all across the term psychosocial hazards. But work health and safety regulations require that all workplaces manage psychosocial meaning those emotional and psychosocial hazards. That they're managed. Psychosocial hazards are defined as hazards that may cause psychological harm. So we're talking about harming somebody's mental health. Psychological safety is a leadership issue. And I really wanted to highlight that a little bit more. That it is a leadership issue. It impacts performance, retention and culture. And your leaders shape the daily work experience. So what's happening in the day, particularly those leaders that are in those middle management or supervisory-based roles or those - when I talk employment services, your team leaders, your site managers, those sort of levels. Wellbeing is behavioural and not program-based. So we know that it's about behaviours that need to shift here, in terms of how do we manage these psychosocial hazards. And your leadership behaviours are at the core of that within your organisation. When we talk about psychosocial hazards there's a number of them. There's actually more that appear everyday but the core psychosocial hazards are these ones here. So we have the high job demands. We have low job control. We have poor support. We have role conflict or ambiguity. We have inadequate reward and recognition. We have poorly managed change, organisational injustice or

fairness, poor workplace relationships, poor communication, low psychological safety or poor culture, remote or isolated work, exposure to traumatic content, violence, aggression, exposure, poor physical environmental conditions, low organisational support during stress, job insecurity or career uncertainty or low meaning or purpose in work. So there's 17 of those there. I think what I'm really curious of those of you that are on this session, if you're happy to pop something in the chat, is which of these feel most present do you think across our sector, in terms of - and not saying it might be right now within your organisation or it could be but what is feeling most present or most present across our sector. I know that I can probably automatically identify a couple that may pop up here but if you can share in the chat what you think - which hazards are the ones we probably as a sector need to be a little bit more aware of because of the environment in which we work in. I'll see if anyone is happy to share. Thanks, Todd, job security given the cultural-based environment we work in. I think that's really, really important and something to be really aware of in your organisation is how do you actually create an environment that supports knowing that there is that insecurity. Yes, remote isolated work. Tim, thank you for sharing that. I think there's a lot of locations or sites that you may have that are quite remote and isolated or you may only have one or two people that are working in a particular site or location. So having a strategy around how you're supporting that is really, really important to mitigate some of the risks around that hazard as well. Definitely, Linda, the role overload. I think that is definitely something that - and that's where the leadership behaviours need to come in to have those conversations to be really talking about, where can you be further supported in the work that you're doing and really understanding the impacts of that overload or that work overload. Definitely that violence and aggression exposure. Definitely having that exposure to those traumatic kind of environments. That is definitely something that is quite prominent in our sector as well. Yes, exclusion, definitely, Elise. That is something that we need to look at and that psychological safety, Megan, the traumatic content again. Client trauma. Obviously your frontline teams are listening to a lot of stories that are quite traumatic within their clients or they have lived experience of trauma themselves. So I think that that's really important to make sure that you're putting things around those people to ensure that those hazards around their mental health and things like that are supported in that space. Poor communication and poorly managed change and those high job demands, thanks, Rob. I think you're right there. One of the big things in organisation like Bounce we don't just work inside the sector but inside the sector as well. One of the things we come across is 9 times out of 10 things will come down to communication. Things will always

break down based on communication. When we get down into the nuts and bolts of it, it is always around communication. So it's really understanding what does good communication look like versus what does poor communication look like and what does that standard look like across your organisation. So I think that's really important. And poorly managed change. We are in a sector that changes very often. So OFH people if you're going to work in employment services you need to be able to handle change or work with change because it changes quite often. It is really important to make sure there's supports around change. What does it look like? The communication around change when it's occurring is really, really important. Not just pretending everything is going to be okay but actually communicate what the change might mean, whether that's negative or positive. That communication piece is really important. Some of the others are listed there. Again, external factors, definitely. Personal - people's personal lives of impacting their performance is definitely there as well. And your frontline teams having that low job control. Thanks, Todd, for bringing that up. I think that's really important. You work in an environment under a contract that's quite prescribed. So how do you create autonomy in quite a prescriptive-based contract? So it's about in your organisations how do we actually need to - how do we need to create a level of autonomy in those roles as well. And thanks, Rod, for clarifying. The people that need to know are the last to be told, particularly when it's around change. So sometimes some of those change conversations are happening at a high level. The frontline teams or even frontline leaders are one of the last to find out, in terms of what that change is. So that's a really important factor as well. Thank you for everyone sharing. I think what it does is really highlights that this is very relevant to our sector and these hazards are definitely - they're there. They're existing. So how do we mitigate those? And that's where the work we do is really coming in and working on those leadership-based behaviours and how do we develop leadership behaviours that actually support in the mitigation of these hazards within your workplaces. Some of the most frequent psychosocial hazards and you've listed a number of them there, but some of the most frequent ones are the high job demands. So this is in some studies recording around 89% of workers in some studies have recorded this. This is not just in employment services but in businesses in general. So excessive workloads, time pressures, emotional demands of their roles. So particularly in employment services often driven by high caseloads, constant change leads to fatigue and burn-out. Those of you that have been in the sector for a long time you may have even been there yourself. It's getting to that point where things seem all too much. There's too much change, there's too many things happening. There's such a

thing as change fatigue, even reform fatigue, dare I say it, where IEA in particular has just rolled out. Poor leadership. 78% of workers have indicated this. There's a large proportion of workers experiencing inconsistent or insufficient support from leaders. So that includes lack of guidance, limited feedback and avoidance of difficult conversations. I mentioned that earlier. Sometimes if it just seems too hard it just doesn't get addressed. So avoiding the difficult conversations can create more challenges, particularly in this psychosocial safety space. Lack of role clarity. Actually 90% of workers have raised lack of role clarity. Many workers report being unclear about their role, responsibilities or priorities. That creates confusion, duplication or frustration, particularly in fast changing environments. I worked with an organisation who they created a position description, put the person on but very quickly became, oh, now we're going to give you this and now we're going to give you that and now we're going to give you this because obviously they were quite efficient in what they were doing. But it became very, very ambiguous in terms of what their role was. So not getting really clear around what the expectations were because they had all of these different things that weren't originally part of their initial position description. And that can happen once you're in a role after some time things get layered on to things and your role becomes unrecognisable to what you thought it was going to be. So I think it's really important to stay on top of those things and to have those conversations with your leaders. If it's your role you're concerned about or if you're a leader with your staff, recognising where that may be occurring and create clarity for them because that's really, really important. Low job control as well. It was about 67% of workers feel they have limited control over how their work is done. So low autonomy, I talked about that just before, can lead to frustration...where you can create autonomy within your organisations and within the roles within your organisations you will have a better sense. People will be less frustrated. They'll own their roles a lot more. They'll be more engaged. So where you can create that level of autonomy, I know in a highly prescribed contract, but there will be elements where you can allow for autonomy. Don't layer more prescription on top of what's already there, I think is probably the advice I would give. So in terms offer what leaders can do is think about this from a simple risk lens that can be used as leaders or as anyone working in organisations is understanding, identifying. So do we have a clear understanding of psychosocial hazards within our context? Within your organisation's context, within the sector's context? Consult. Do we proactively seek staff input? So not just surveys but are we having conversations? Surveys are great but they'll only give you part of the picture. So are we having conversations that will give us the information that we need? Are we

really getting that staff input that we need? Then around the control, are our leaders equipped to manage workloads, role clarity and change safely? Do the leaders have that sense of - you know, leadership behaviour is a control measure as I've got written there. So do they have that ability to do that? Are policies reflected in actual behaviours? And we'll give some examples of that later on. And do we measure, so how are we monitoring? Do we measure culture? Do we measure trust, wellbeing, turnover, conflict and leadership capacity? That's a really important one. How are we measuring our leadership capacity across our organisation? Some of those other things. So you need to be able to measure and then monitor what's happening and then be able to review. So really looking at it from that point of view gives a really good, I suppose, lens that you can look at this from. For anyone that's in People & Culture and HR, I'm sorry for this slide, but behaviours matter more than policies. Our policies are really important and you need to have them. We understand that. But behaviours matter more than policies. I'll give some examples in a moment. But leaders influence clarity, capacity, fairness and voice. So culture itself is a risk system. So just really understanding how leaders - policies don't control behaviours in real moments. So people decide what is safe by observing. By observing how leaders respond when concerns are raised, what happens when mistakes are made, whether questions are welcomed or shut down or how workload priorities and conflicts are handled. So that's what people are observing when they're deciding whether it's safe to actually raise something within an organisation. So those behaviours are so much more important because that's what matters in those moments, in those day-to-day moments of your business. So to give you some practical examples around this. For example, you may have a policy or a system or you've got something out there in the world that says that we encourage people to raise concerns. We want people to raise concerns. But what the culture is showing is that leaders get defensive. Issues are minimised when they are raised. Or people that speak up are labelled difficult. So the culture is saying that but the policy is saying a different thing. So the result of that is the psychological safety risk increases, not because the policy is missing, but because the culture teaches silence. I'm sure any of you could give an example of where that's happened before. Another example is we manage workload sustainably. That's the policy. We'll manage people's workloads. Right. We'll effectively manage your workload. You'll never be overworked. This is the policy. But the culture shows that urgency is rewarded. Prioritisation never happens. And saying I'm at capacity is seen as a weakness. So this is not saying this is what happens in your organisations but this is what can happen and definitely I have seen in organisations. So the result of that is high job demands become

normalised and that increases that burn-out risk. Another example of that is working long hours. Right. A long time ago that became the norm. Like that was how you got promoted. It's like, they're working long hours, let's promote them but things have changed. It's not so much about the amount of hours that you work it's what you produce in that time that is more important. That many years ago it used to be more about, that person works really hard. They're working 12 hours a day. It was something people wore as a bit of a badge, hey, I worked 12 hours yesterday or 14 hours or however many hours it was. But I think things have shifted in that people don't see that as a good thing now and particularly during those COVID years things shifted in that space. That it's not so much important around the amount of hours that you're doing but it's about what you're achieving in that time. So I think it's really important to think about, what does your policy say but what is the culture actually telling you? What's living and breathing within your organisation? Another practical example is that we have clear roles and responsibilities but the culture actually shows that priorities change without explanation, multiple leaders are giving conflicting direction and I understand within employment services you can have various levels of leadership so that can happen and saying that's not my role is discouraged. So role ambiguity increases creating confusion, overload and anxiety. Not because roles are documented but because clarity is not reinforced in practice. Lucas has just made a comment here, if you are being overworked and you still need to do the hours and do not get any praise for this, yes, I think that is a leadership thing. It's the recognition of going, oh, I've identified and I really appreciate that that person's been putting in that extra time. So once again leadership behaviours, how are they responding to that when somebody is doing that? Because for you it might not be about the over work and you're doing the hours but you're not getting praised for the work that you're actually doing so I think that's really important. And I definitely agree, Jane, over work definitely identifies lack of resources and time management. That's exactly how that should be looked at. Whereas as I said, many years ago it was more of a, hey, I'm working all these hours and people would be promoted because of the hours they're putting in, not necessarily around the output of the work that they're doing. I'm not saying that happens for everyone but there are many examples of that. We communicate, I think this one will be something that you'll all be aware of but policy might say, we communicate effectively or openly during change. But the culture actually shows that decisions are shared late, impact on workload isn't acknowledged during a period of change and questions are framed as resistance. So when you're asking questions about the change it can be viewed as you're being resistant to the change but you're just really trying

to get a better understanding around the change. So that does result in uncertainty and stress increase during change, not because change is unavoidable but because emotional and operational impacts are not actively managed. So I think that's a really important one, particularly for our sector. So, yeah. So I think that's an important one to understand there specifically. Another one is that we treat everyone fairly. Once again, decisions are made where exceptions are granted inconsistently. So, for example, somebody might be getting some sort of benefit that somebody else isn't. And some voices carry more weight than others. Sometimes those that speak up are heard more than the ones that don't speak up as often. So we always see that. So there is then that perceived unfairness and that increases and it undermines the trust and engagement within the organisation. But not because fairness isn't values but because transparency and consistency are missing. So that's a really important one too. And we stay connected as a team. That's what the policy might say but check-ins are task-focused only. Isolation goes unnoticed or connection is optional, not intentional. So the result there is disconnection and loneliness increase. Not because flexibility is harmful but because connection isn't deliberately led. That's particularly important if you're a leader of multiple locations or sites is how do you remain connected in such a remote workforce and really have a deliberate action around that. I know here at Bounce we all work remotely but we have very structured deliberate ways in which we stay connected as a team. So we have a Monday Teams where we set our intentions for the week. We have a Whatsapp check-in every morning as a group. And on Wednesday's we have that mid-week check-in that's live on Teams that we check in as a team. So we have those deliberate actions that we're taking so that we feel connected as a team on a consistent basis. So when we talk about how leadership behaviour reduces risk. So this sort of - it's a bit of a table that I've got here but when we think about, and I've just used some of the hazards as an example. I'll only discuss a couple of them. This is going to be sent out to you all and it is being recorded so you will get this presentation but I'm also conscious of time. So high job demands, what does a leader need to do. Then maybe prioritise coaching. In terms of your frontline staff they probably need some stuff around energy and stress regulation. So these are the things that you can help reduce these risks. Poor change management. Make sure you're having as leaders those change conversations and make sure you've got that level of adaptability on your frontline workforce as well. Role ambiguity, clarity contracting. It's a deliberate leadership conversation with mutually agreed expectations. Have those conversations. What that does is it gives that sense of identity and values clarity to your frontline teams. And that low psychological safety. We have a model called the

BE Model which I'll flick on to in a minute but it gives your team confidence to step up. On this next slide I've actually got a bit of a way you can mitigate these 17 psychosocial hazards from a leader behaviour mitigation space and then from a workforce capability mitigation. So there is a QR code there for you, if you want to, where you can actually download that as a quick reference guide for you as well. So I'll - yeah. That's available to you there. I'll just quickly - because I'm conscious of time and I've got a couple more slides to go through but this will be sent out to you so you can access the QR code from there. We won't go into too much detail with this but at Bounce we created this BE Model for psychological safety leadership. What we focused on were three key areas for key leadership. Be self-aware, understand your own way of being as a leader is really important. Be authentic so that you can build trust. And then be curious. Make sure that - and you're asking questions to understand. So using those three kind of areas in this BE Model is really important as leaders to help you to mitigate some of these hazards. If you can be self-aware, be authentic and be curious in your role as a leader then you are well and truly on your way in terms of mitigating some of these hazards in your workplace. So what does the BE Model in practice look like? It might be coaching check-ins that you're having. It might be capacity and prioritisation conversations. So how is your workload at the moment? What do you need to prioritise? I've got a particular staff member that I need to do this regularly with. She sees everything and gets overwhelmed. It's like, okay, no, let's actually prioritise what's the most important things that need to be actioned immediately. So I work with her on that prioritisation piece. It becomes less overwhelming. It's really important to have those conversations. That clarity and expectation setting as a leader. Sit down and have those conversations. Give clarity to the things that you've asked for and set expectations. And that support and challenge, have the conversations. It's all about communication. If I can say one thing, communication is so important here. And energy and stress regulation. Not own only for yourself as a leader, if you're in a leadership role, but as a frontline staff member. Energy regulation. Make sure they're managing that themselves as well. Give them tools around that is really important. So what can businesses embed? You can look at leadership capability uplift. Look at your leadership and go, where do we need to build our capability in their leadership behaviours? Have those role clarity and change conversations, I think, is really, really important. Make sure there are safe escalation pathways within your organisation. That people feel safe in actually having - raising things and having those conversations. And definitely have those culture and leadership metrics. You can't monitor or manage what you can't measure. So how do we know that your leadership - all levels of

leadership in your organisation are - have the behaviours that they need to be able to mitigate some of these risks? What have you got in place to be able to measure that, to know that that's working? So I think that's really important. If you can't monitor or measure what you can't measure so it's really, really important to have some sort of measurement. So let's just remember that psychological safety is built daily. It's behavioural. Leaders are the system. Leadership behaviour shapes systems, culture and experiences for teams daily. And small shifts matter. So consistent small behaviour changes compound into meaningful improvements in safety in this space. So it's really, really important. And as I said, it is behavioural. So it's created through actions, not policies or programs. So it's really focused on what's actually happening in that space. So as we move to the end of this - to this presentation and I allow for some questions, I have a question for you all, what leadership behaviour do you think you could change or if you're not in a leadership role, just any behaviour you could change tomorrow to make your team feel clearer, safer or more supported? Or if you are a frontline staff member, what behaviour could you change tomorrow to make your team, because you're part of a team, feel more supported and safer? Just as a colleague as well. Someone has just written, be more present across the sites, which I think is great. Presence says a lot. What's interesting is when you're not present people make things mean something. We're mean making machines, as we say. So regular team catch-ups as a whole, especially when working remotely. I think that's really important as well. Please continue to share there. That is the end of our presentation today. I know we have time for some Q&A but I will read out some of the others. We have be consistent with behaviours with all staff. And definitely protecting that one-on-one time for each staff catch-up. So don't let distractions get in the way. I know it's very easy to go, we'll just put that off. Can we do it next week. It's really important. Being curious is such an important strength to have. Asking more questions. When someone says something, dig a little bit deeper. Use some coaching language to actually understand that more. Regular catch-ups with the team individually. Connecting more meaningfully when visiting sites. Not just turning up and chatting with everyone. Having real meaningful conversations. That might mean more coaching-based conversations. Actively listening and definitely really get a sense of what's happening and pick up, if you get a sense something is not right for someone, have that conversation with them. Is there anything I can support you with? Allow for more communication, allow others to have an opportunity to raise issues, I think is really important. And, Nicole, I know you've said there, understanding how team members feel connected and included. Some like calls, some like emails, some like lots of detail. It's exactly

the way. Everyone is different for them. Have the conversation. How would they like to be acknowledged, how would you like to be supported as a leader. It's really, really important. Megan, I agree. Ask for feedback on yourself as a leader. That's really, really important. Hannah, be curious rather than furious. I love that one. And being open, honest and available. Not just saying that you are but actually doing it, that's a different thing. And promote the open door policy and be available. Once again, that word gets thrown, open door policy, but is it really? So making sure that what you're saying is actually what's living and breathing within your organisation. So that is the presentation for today. I know there's so much more to uncover in this topic but hopefully that's given you all a little bit of insight into the importance of this across your organisation, not just as a HR or People and Culture thing to be dealing with or not just a tick box to say we have a policy on this. It's something that needs to live and breathe within your organisation. Thank you very much.

SALLY: Incredible. Thank you so much, Kelly. That has been really insightful and I think a really great summary of what is a really important topic and something that is certainly being widely spoken about at the moment and understandably so. As we mentioned a copy of today's presentation and a recording will be made available. So if you want to go back over it, re-listen to any of those points or share it with other people within your organisations, absolutely encourage you to do so. If you've got questions about Kelly or the work at Bounce you can absolutely reach out to the team there as well. But, yeah, otherwise don't forget to log your CPD points for today for all of the people involved in DEA's membership program. In two weeks' time we'll be back with another session that is going to cover navigating relationships along the employment journey. So please join us for that. And very soon we are going to launch a very, very quick poll. So if you could just stay on for a moment or two to respond to that, that would be really helpful to us and the work that we're doing here with these sessions. But otherwise a huge thanks to Simon and Renae who have been in the background making everything run so smoothly. And especially a huge thanks to Kelly for coming along and sharing all of that knowledge and information. And thank you to everyone for giving up your lunchtime to spend it with us today. Have a lovely rest of the day, everyone.