Measuring mentally healthy workplaces

A practical guide for
small business and sole traders

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Measurement doesn't need to be hard
and good measures can help you:

◆ figure out what is and isn't working to make your workplace more mentally healthy

◆ solve specific problems about your work, workers or workplace

◆ comply with work health and safety obligations

◆ improve your business practices and meet goals

◆ improve the mental health of you and your workers

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Using measurement to improve mental health at work

Do people feel safe and supported? Is stress at work impacting health and wellbeing? Does your business feel like a good place to work?

Many people are aware of the importance of mental health at work, but sometimes it's difficult to know where to start, or how things are tracking. This guide outlines measures that can help small businesses and sole traders create a mentally healthy workplace.

What is a mentally healthy workplace?

A mentally healthy workplace recognises that protecting and supporting the mental health and wellbeing of workers is a core part of everyday operations. This goes beyond raising awareness and responding to people affected by mental ill-health, mental health conditions and suicide. It means creating an environment and culture that promotes wellbeing. It includes proactively reducing work-related sources of harm and identifying ways to promote the positive aspects of work.

For more information about mentally healthy workplaces for small businesses see:

◆ **The National Mental Health Commission's Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces**

haveyoursay.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/blueprint-for-mentally-healthy-workplaces

◆ **Everymind's Ahead for Business**

aheadforbusiness.org.au

◆ **Beyond Blue's Heads Up**

www.headsup.org.au/healthy-workplaces/healthy-workplaces-for-small-businesses

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Measurement can improve decisions and action

Understanding a problem helps you identify the best solutions and actions. Small businesses already use measurement to understand things like leads, referrals, turnover, cashflow, pricing and customer satisfaction.

Measurement and data can also help small businesses understand whether their workplace is mentally healthy.

Measurement can help understand:

- what current practices support and promote good mental health
- where aspects of work are causing stress, conflict or concern
- whether people need additional supports, and which supports will work best
- how certain actions, decisions or programs impact workers' mental health
- where there are patterns and trends that point to areas of strength or concern
- whether people find the workplace rewarding, supportive and inclusive – or whether they find it stressful or harmful.

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Unlike many larger organisations, small businesses generally don't require complex measurement systems to get the information they need to make decisions.

There is probably a lot of data already on hand, or that's easy to access. Using this data to set goals, track progress or make improvements can create better outcomes for people and businesses.
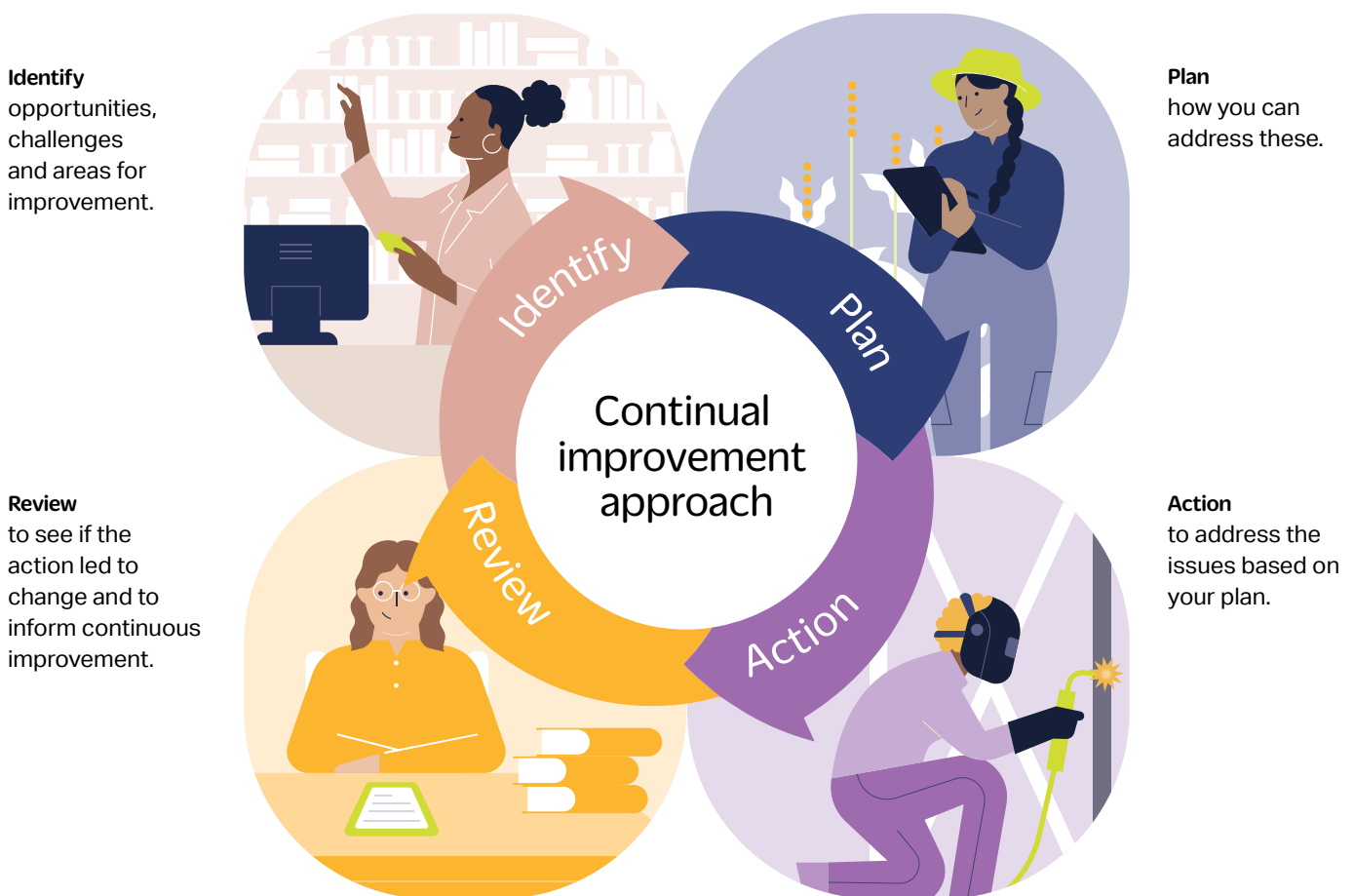
Measurement is key to a continual improvement approach

Identify opportunities, challenges and areas for improvement.

Plan how you can address these.

Review to see if the action led to change and to inform continuous improvement.

Action to address the issues based on your plan.

Continual improvement approach

Identify

Plan

Review

Action

Figure 1: Measuring for continuous improvement

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Identify the area for improvement

Measurement will be most effective when you have a specific goal in mind, or a problem or issue you want to address. By targeting one thing that you aim to understand better, you can focus your efforts and energy.

Turning focus areas into questions can help you identify what data you need. Some examples of questions could include the following:

Focus area	Question
A worker returning to work after a period of mental ill-health.	• How well is the business supporting their return to work?
Frequent conflict between two co-workers.	• What are some of the things contributing to this conflict? • For example, are workloads or unclear responsibilities creating tension?
Feeling tired and overwhelmed at work.	• Do workloads or routine need to change so you and/or workers can refresh or reduce stress? • Do we have the resources needed to do work well? • How are we looking after ourselves?

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Not sure where to start?

There are three pillars of a mentally healthy workplace.

Potential ways to address all three pillars can be found in **Appendix 3**

Protect ⚖

Identify and manage work-related risks to mental health.

Respond

Build capability to identify and respond to support people experiencing mental ill-health or distress.

Promote

Recognise and enhance the positive aspects of work that contribute to good mental health.

The **Protect** pillar is a good place to start, as all workplaces have legal obligations to protect the health and safety of their workers, including their psychological health. This includes the elimination, as far as reasonably practicable, of psychological hazards.

For more information about these obligations see:
www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/safety-topic/industry-and-business/small-business

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Create and share your plan with the team

Some simple planning can make sure that your choice of actions and approach provides the information you need.

Some things to consider include the following:

- Why is this specific data needed? How will it help make better decisions?

- What financial, human and other resources will be required to collect the data?

- What are the potential benefits?

- What are some potential challenges or risks?

- What concerns might workers have (e.g., confidentiality, scrutiny or surveillance)?

- What is my plan for protecting privacy?

The importance of privacy

The *Privacy Act 1988* and the *Australian Privacy Principles* set out rules and responsibilities for managing data, with particular duties around sensitive information like racial or ethnic origin, religious beliefs, criminal record and health information. You will need to consider how you will use, protect, store and dispose of personal information you collect.

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If you are planning to collect data or consult with workers, it is important that you share your proposed approach with your team. A shared approach can build trust and encourage people to participate. Importantly, your team members may have good ideas that you haven't considered.

Things that may be useful to discuss include:

- why data collection is taking place, including expected benefits

- whether participation is voluntary or mandatory

- what will be required of people

- any feedback or suggestions

- any concerns people have, such as how their information will be stored and used and who might be able to access it.

The timing of when you share the approach with your team will depend on your business. Some businesses, particularly family businesses or partnerships, may choose to involve everyone from the beginning. Others may choose to draft a detailed process or plan before seeking feedback from the team.

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Awareness of common pitfalls can help you interpret your data

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Awareness of common pitfalls can help you interpret your data

Pitfall: **Using indicators that aren't really relevant to your problem(s).**

Consideration: If an indicator is not relevant, it does not add value and resources should not be devoted to tracking it. Look for indicators that better meet your needs.

Pitfall: **Relying on a single measure or indicator; it may not show you the whole picture and could be misleading.**

Consideration: Use more than one measure/indicator, or supplement your data with other information, such as descriptions of activities or outcomes and conversations with employees, to give context and perspective. For example, if an employee takes multiple days off without approval, don't just measure days off, understand the underlying reason, especially what was happening for them at work.

Pitfall: **Assuming that problems have a single cause; often lots of factors occur together to influence an outcome, or a person's experience. These include both work-related and non-work-related factors.**

Consideration: Don't let a focus on tracking a particular measure distract you from identifying alternative, potentially easier or more beneficial work-related solutions.

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Select the best data sources

A range of information can help to answer questions and to identify areas of improvement regarding mentally healthy workplaces. Data may be numbers and measures, or it can also be descriptions, explanations and observations.

Looking at a question from a few different perspectives or data sources can be more useful than relying on a single metric or measure.

The better the quality of your data, the more useful it is for informing good decisions and creating appropriate actions. Quality data reduces the chance of misinterpretation or misleading results.

To evaluate the quality of your data you should ask:

- Does it answer your questions?
- Is there potential for data errors?

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Data from the business

Gathering data from your day-to-day operations can be an easy and efficient way for a small business or sole trader to better understand what is happening in the workplace. Some data may already be available in your human resource and accounting records. You can also gather new data, for example, through observations or work diaries.

Some common sources of data from your business, and possible uses include the following:

Data source	What might it tell you?
Records about your people, e.g., time off, resignations, workers compensation claims	• Are people able to take time off for a break, or when they or a family member are unwell? • Are more people quitting than you would like? • Are resignations more common amongst particular groups (e.g., individuals from diverse backgrounds or a particular work group or team)? • What types of harm or ill-health do workers experience, and how does their work contribute to this?
Work records and diaries, e.g., hours worked, tasks and duties	• Do you or your workers regularly work excessive hours? Are there some duties or tasks that might be causing this? • Are there patterns in working hours that can suggest when is a good time to take leave?
Workplace interactions, e.g., between workers or with customers/clients	• Is there conflict between workers? • Are customers aggressive? • How do you and your workers respond to conflict or aggression? • Do people support each other at work?
Financial data, e.g., cost of injury and/or lost time, cost of resources for mental health	• How much productive time and money is lost to workplace stress, conflict or burnout? • How much are you investing in supporting mental health and wellbeing?

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Data from workers

Looking at data from your business activity may not tell you enough about how or why things at work are affecting the mental health of your workers. Talking to workers about their thoughts, feelings, experiences and needs is useful. Openness creates and maintains trust and helps workers feel involved in business decisions that affect them.

It can also be a chance to collaborate on finding solutions to identified problems. Following up with workers on progress builds trust that issues are being considered and there is transparency and feedback on how they are addressed.

In most cases, these activities can be conducted by the business owner or team member, but there are also external providers who can support data collection. This may be useful if you have limited time, or you want an independent perspective or just feel under qualified and need help.

Data source	This is useful	This is NOT useful
Worker meetings	• When an issue affects all workers • When you want different opinions	• When an issue is private or sensitive; people may not want to talk in a group • When an issue only affects some workers, others may feel participating is a waste of time
One-to-one chats	• When an issue is sensitive or private • When an issue only affects one or some workers • When there is conflict between co-workers • When it is difficult to get all workers together at the same time	• When a person might feel targeted or uncomfortable in a one-to-one setting (This can be helped by giving the person an opportunity to have a support person present)

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Data source	This is useful	This is NOT useful
Surveys	• When workers prefer to respond privately • When you want to measure things like individuals' attitudes or experiences • When you want to track the same thing(s) over time	• When it would be difficult for your workers to complete a survey (e.g., lack of access to computer, low literacy or English as second language) • When information collected is highly sensitive and the survey is difficult to complete anonymously
Wellbeing self-checks	• When you are uncertain or concerned about your own wellbeing • When workers prefer privacy • When you want workers to have control over their own data	• When you want to use the results to develop support plans

Individual mental health and wellbeing self-checks

You or your team may want to understand more about personal mental health and wellbeing. There are a range of free, online self-checks that have been developed by experts.

These can help gain insights into what you are doing well and where you may benefit from additional support. Some examples are:

◆ **Ahead for Business Five-minute Wellbeing Check**
www.aheadforbusiness.org.au/check-ups/mental-health-check-up

◆ **Superfriend Wellbeing Quiz**
www.superfriend.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Looking-After-You.pdf

◆ **MindSpot Assessment**
www.mindspot.org.au/before-assessment

By using these free and confidential tools, people can understand more about mental health and wellbeing without fear that personal data about their mental health may impact their employment.

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Interpret your data

Interpreting your data is about understanding the story behind the information. This will help you plan new actions or review the actions taken.

Some helpful questions to help you uncover the story behind the data include the following:

- How have results changed across time – are they different this year from last year? Do they vary at different times of year (e.g., around Christmas or school holidays) or perhaps at the same time as some other work-related activities or events?

- Are your results actionable? Do they provide information that helps you know what you need to do to improve your processes, or outcomes?

- Is there enough data to understand the 'full picture'?

- Have the measures you currently use now served their purpose? Is it time to refocus attention on something different? Or is it useful to continue monitoring the issue(s) over a longer time frame?

Deciding whether your results are 'good' or 'bad' can be challenging. People are often interested in comparing themselves to other businesses, but because each business is different, a range of reasons may explain why your results are different.

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Communicating your results

Unless your data collection involved particularly sensitive issues, or involved just one or two people, it's usually a good idea to share the outcomes and/or conclusions with the broader team. This helps maintain workers' trust and enables everyone to work together to identify changes or solutions.

Things to consider when communicating the results include the following:

- What were the results?
- What problems did they reveal? Do you propose to address them? How? When?
- What achievements or positive feedback did you find?
- What are you going to do next and why?
- What are the patterns of continual improvement?

In some cases, it might be useful to share results with people outside the business, such as advisors, customers or clients, to communicate your achievements and performance.

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Important considerations

There are some things that are useful to keep in mind to make your measurement plan work. These include the following:

Keep good records	There are legal requirements related to storing some records, such as payroll records. Finding a way to keep track of information related to mentally healthy workplaces makes it easier to look at trends over time, re-analyse information or understand patterns within the business.
	Finding a system that works for you will make record keeping more sustainable. It could be notes in a folder, a secure app, a spreadsheet or tracking information in an accounting or human resource software program.
	It is important to make sure that your record keeping system is private and confidential when collecting personal or sensitive information. This can be particularly important in a small business where people may share offices, computers or accounts.
Measurement can change behaviour	People often change their behaviour when they know they are being observed. They also change their behaviour when there is an incentive to achieve a specified goal.

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Important considerations

Watch out for unintended outcomes

It is important for people to understand why goals or targets are important. Without this, well-meaning goals or targets can create the opposite outcomes to those you want.

For example, if you set a target to reduce conflict within teams, people may feel unable to raise important but potentially controversial issues or concerns. This can result in an increase, rather than decrease, in stress and anxiety at work where people avoid work colleagues rather than learning to work together more effectively.

It is important that you understand how results were achieved, not just whether or not a goal or target was reached.

It can look worse before it looks better

Asking questions about things like mental health or stressors at work can signal to people that you are open to hearing about these topics. This means that people may open up to you more about these issues. Hearing concerns or experiences of mental ill-health can make it feel like new problems are emerging or old issues are becoming worse.

This may simply be because people feel comfortable to share things for the first time, and these concerns or problems already existed.

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Important considerations

Surveys in small business

There are a number of free, online survey toolkits that can help you better understand your work and workers. Toolkits can be useful as they provide all the questions for you, and they come with detailed instructions on how to conduct the survey and interpret the results. However, it is also useful to think carefully when choosing a survey about whether it is the best fit for your small business. Many toolkits are designed for medium to large organisations, so may be too much work for a small business, or the questions may not be a good fit for the small business context.

Additionally, although surveys are often designed to be anonymous, having a small number of workers can mean that surveys can't really be completed anonymously. Even without collecting names, a person's identity may be revealed in their answers, particularly if any personal information is collected like age, gender or occupation.

The potential to be identified may reduce your workers' willingness to complete the survey. Consider whether information that may identify individuals is essential, and, if so, clearly explain to workers that this may make it difficult for results to be anonymous.

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A quick guide to measuring data

Measuring is a process of turning the world around us, the things we see, do and feel, into numbers. In understanding mentally health workplaces, the numbers we tend to use involve determining the quantity, frequency or degree of something related to your workers, work or workplace (e.g., working time, encounters with aggressive customers, quality of working relationships). Measurement can then be used to help assess the scale of problems, solutions or experiences to inform better decision making.

Measures	Measures directly capture information about the subject we are interested in. For example, we can measure properties, such as the time and cost, or measure the frequency of things by simply counting them.
Indicators	Indicators are used when the thing we are interested in can't be measured directly, for example, 'health', 'safety' or 'wellbeing', which do not have clearly defined properties for us to count or to measure easily. Instead, we can identify something else to measure that provides a useful proxy, or indicator. The trick is to make sure that the indicator is sufficiently closely related, so that any changes made in the indicator mirror changes in the subject of interest.
Metrics	Metrics are calculations from multiple (often two) measures. Metrics can be more useful indicators than measures, as they reflect multiple factors. For example, the number of workers experiencing a mental health injury is a measure; the percentage of workers experiencing an injury is a metric calculated by dividing the total number of workers by the number who experienced an injury. In this case, the metric may be more useful as it can provide an insight into how common injuries are.

High-quality measures

The quality of data hinges on three main characteristics:

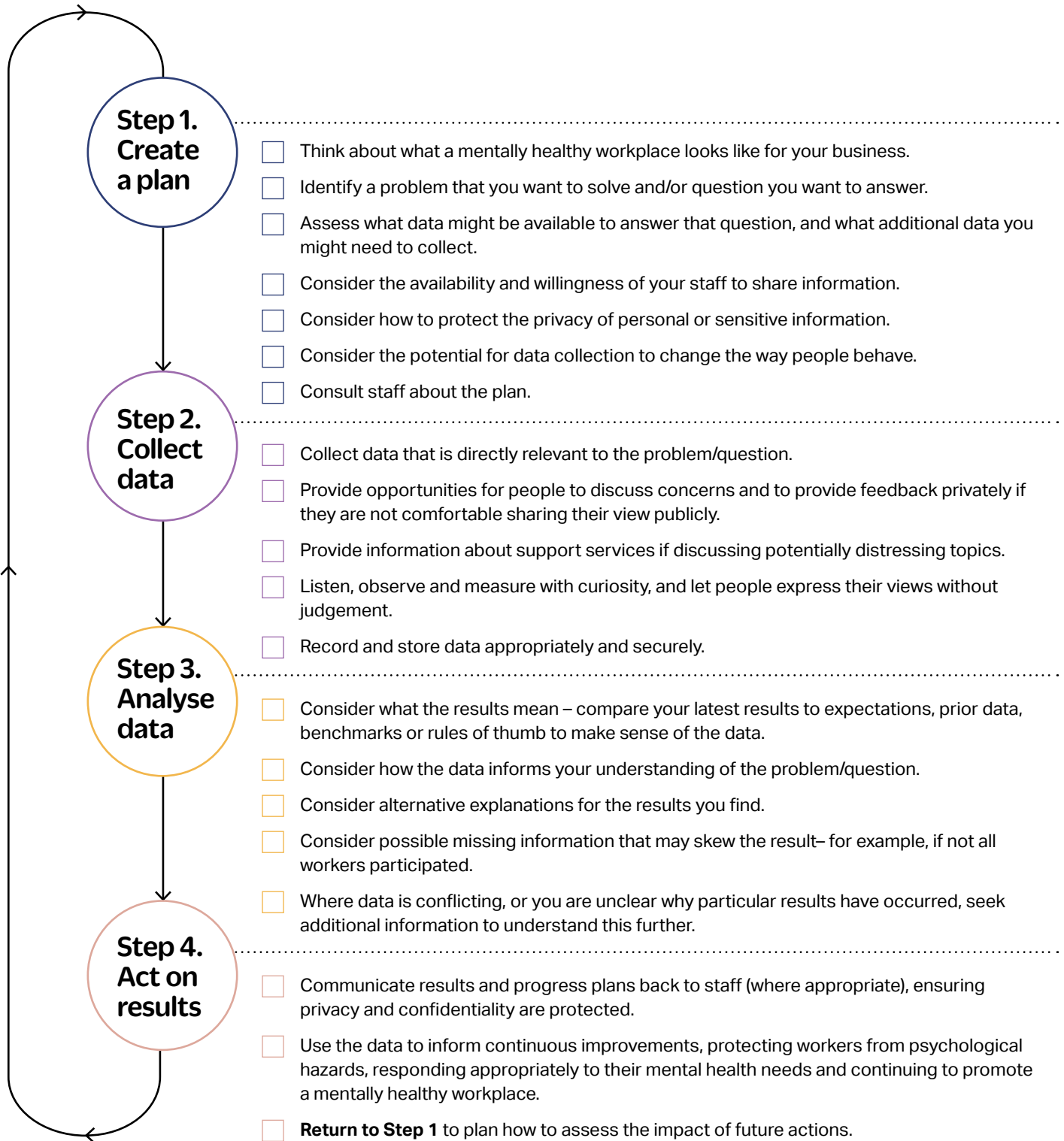| **Relevance**	**Reliability**	**Validity**
Is it directly useful for informing decisions?	Can it be trusted, is it accurate and unbiased?	Is it clear what the data has actually measured and what it means?

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This measurement checklist can help you think through your approach

Step 1. Create a plan

☐ Think about what a mentally healthy workplace looks like for your business.

☐ Identify a problem that you want to solve and/or question you want to answer.

☐ Assess what data might be available to answer that question, and what additional data you might need to collect.

☐ Consider the availability and willingness of your staff to share information.

☐ Consider how to protect the privacy of personal or sensitive information.

☐ Consider the potential for data collection to change the way people behave.

☐ Consult staff about the plan.

Step 2. Collect data

☐ Collect data that is directly relevant to the problem/question.

☐ Provide opportunities for people to discuss concerns and to provide feedback privately if they are not comfortable sharing their view publicly.

☐ Provide information about support services if discussing potentially distressing topics.

☐ Listen, observe and measure with curiosity, and let people express their views without judgement.

☐ Record and store data appropriately and securely.

Step 3. Analyse data

☐ Consider what the results mean – compare your latest results to expectations, prior data, benchmarks or rules of thumb to make sense of the data.

☐ Consider how the data informs your understanding of the problem/question.

☐ Consider alternative explanations for the results you find.

☐ Consider possible missing information that may skew the result– for example, if not all workers participated.

☐ Where data is conflicting, or you are unclear why particular results have occurred, seek additional information to understand this further.

Step 4. Act on results

☐ Communicate results and progress plans back to staff (where appropriate), ensuring privacy and confidentiality are protected.

☐ Use the data to inform continuous improvements, protecting workers from psychological hazards, responding appropriately to their mental health needs and continuing to promote a mentally healthy workplace.

☐ **Return to Step 1** to plan how to assess the impact of future actions.

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Protect pillar

Things you need to do: Identify psychological hazards, eliminate hazards or reduce risks to mental health.

Questions you could ask and measures you could use:

Are we meeting our legal obligations to systematically identify and manage risks to psychological health?	
Possible measures, metrics and indicators	**Considerations**
Number, type and frequency of hazardous exposures (e.g., exposure to bullying and harassment, unrealistic deadlines, prolonged levels of stress, and other psychological health risks).	• Do all staff have the same understanding of what constitutes a social or psychological hazard? • Are staff able (and willing) to report hazards (e.g., communal notebook, reporting system)? • Are some workers at more risk than others? • Why, and what do you need to do about it?
Measures of the resources (e.g., time, cost) invested in identifying and implementing practices that protect workers' mental health from psychosocial hazards.	• What strategies, initiatives or resources are in place to protect workers from risk to their mental health? • Are workers aware of these controls? Are they using them?

⭐ **Tip:** If you plan to make a change in your workplace (e.g., introduce a new way of managing psychosocial hazards) – look at hazard exposures and outcomes and injuries before and after the change to assess the impact of the change.

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Protect pillar – continued

Things you need to do: Identify psychological hazards, eliminate hazards or reduce risks to mental health.

Questions you could ask and measures you could use:

Are staff protected from psychological and social hazards?	
Possible measures, metrics and indicators	**Considerations**
Percentage of staff who report feeling psychologically safe at work	• Are some groups (e.g., those from diverse backgrounds) less likely to feel respected or supported at work and/or more likely to resign? If so, how will you address possible harassment or unacceptable behaviour?
Rate of staff turnover	• Are staff leaving because of workplace stress or harassment? If you collected data about staff perceptions, did staff feel pressure to respond positively?
Number, type and frequency of consultations (e.g., staff meetings) with workers about mental health	• Are staff being consulted enough? • Do all staff contribute in staff meetings? If not, do you need to have one-to-one chats?

⭐ **Tip:** Workers' behaviour and body language can be a useful qualitative indicator of whether staff feel safe and respected. If there is conflict in the workplace, think about observation and other more sensitive and less intrusive ways of gathering information.

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Respond pillar

Things you might be doing: ensuring that you can identify when workers have mental health needs (work-related or not) and could benefit from additional support at work.

Questions you could ask and measures you could use:

Do you understand how to support the mental health needs of workers? Can people speak up when they are experiencing mental ill-health or distress?	
Possible measures, metrics and indicators	**Considerations**
Number of team members trained in mental health or psychological first aid	• Do you and your staff share the same understanding of mental health? • Are trained support people available as needed? • Do you feel confident discussing mental health issues with others?
Number of workers identifying their mental health needs at work (by type of communication medium)	• Do staff feel comfortable raising their mental health needs at work? • Can they disclose their needs privately and confidentially? • Are there multiple ways for staff to raise issues? If so, what are they? • How are workers most comfortable raising their mental health needs? (e.g., talking to business owner, in a survey, focus group or via a colleague or support person)
Number of workers requesting work adjustments to support their mental health, or requesting other types of mental health support	• Do you encourage workers to speak up about their mental health needs? • What types of adjustments are available to support workers? • Do you check that workers have the skills, capability and attitude to perform their work in a mentally healthy way, especially as tasks evolve over time?

⭐ **Tip:** Talking to your staff is particularly important in the Respond pillar – when it comes to mental illness, mental health and wellbeing, people may have a different understanding compared to you and/or each other. Be aware of making assumptions about what another person wants or needs.

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Respond pillar – continued

Things you might be doing: ensuring that you can identify when workers have mental health needs (work-related or not) and could benefit from additional support at work.

Questions you could ask and measures you could use:

Are we adequately supporting workers with mental health needs?	
Possible measures, metrics and indicators	**Considerations**
Percentage of mental health related work adjustment requests approved	• What level of flexibility is available to accommodate the reported mental health needs of workers?
Utilisation rates (if known/ applicable) of the various mental health support resources or services **Rate of satisfaction with mental health support offered (e.g., ranking out of 10 in survey or focus group)**	• Do you provide access to and/or information about a range of mental health supports, including both internal job resources, and externally provided mental health support services (e.g., public health phone lines)? • Which services, resources or support do workers find most useful?
Level of staff with mental health needs who report feeling supported by managers and by co-workers (e.g., score out of 10 in survey or focus group)	• Are staff able to report on co-worker support privately and confidentially (to avoid conflict)? • Are some groups less likely to feel supported than others? If so, how will you improve co-worker social cohesion and supportive behaviours?

⭐ **Tip:** Stigma can be a major barrier to seeking help and can be a source of workplace stress. In addition to utilising free, online resources, think about ways to help break down barriers to talking about mental ill-health and mental illness.

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Promote pillar

Things you might be doing: supporting meaningful work and positive co-worker relationships, rewarding positive behaviours, celebrating diversity and inclusion, and creating an environment that reduces stigma around mental illness.

Questions you could ask and measures you could use:

Do staff find satisfaction in their work environment and feel supported by co-workers?	
Possible measures, metrics and indicators	**Considerations**
Rates of staff satisfaction with the workplace culture, including interpersonal relationships, access to flexible working arrangements etc. (e.g., ranking out of 10 in survey or focus group)	• If there are major differences in satisfaction rates between staff – why? • Can any aspects of jobs be redesigned to improve work satisfaction or work–life balance?
Extent to which staff feel supported by co-workers (e.g., ranking out of 10 in survey or focus group)	• Are staff able to report on co-worker support privately and confidentially (to avoid conflict)? • Are some groups less likely to feel supported than others? If so, how will you improve co-worker social cohesion and supportive behaviours?

⭐ **Tip:** Social comparison can influence workers' perceptions of the support they receive at work. This can influence their perceptions of fairness. A perceived lack of fairness can impede social cohesion, as well as job satisfaction and commitment.

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Promote pillar – continued

Things you might be doing: supporting meaningful work and positive co-worker relationships, rewarding positive behaviours, celebrating diversity and inclusion, and creating an environment that reduces stigma around mental illness.

Questions you could ask and measures you could use:

Do we reward positive behaviours at work, including respect and inclusiveness?	
Possible measures, metrics and indicators	**Considerations**
Level of participation in, and satisfaction with, mental health promotion initiatives	• Is there a shared commitment to a mentally healthy workplace? • Do you have mechanisms in place to promote positive behaviours, not just prevent unacceptable behaviours?
Number and type of communications about inclusion, positive behaviour and staff achievements	• Do you communicate about positive outcomes, inclusion and positive behaviour (or only problems)? Do you reward or acknowledge achievements? • Do staff have a chance to contribute personal stories or experiences about their work and/or personal achievements?

> ⭐ **Tip:** What is seen as respectful behaviour differs significantly across cultures; talk with staff from cultural backgrounds different from your own about their experiences at work and whether their expectations of respectful behaviour differ from your own. Try to create an environment in which everyone can speak up about behaviours they find positive and those they find disrespectful. Remember to share positive examples, not just negative ones.

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This resource was created as part of the National Workplace Initiative.

Research team

Assoc. Professor Sharron O'Neill
School of Business (Accounting), UNSW.

Dr Miriam Glennie
School of Business, (Management) UNSW.

Professor Deborah Blackman
School of Business (Management), UNSW.

Assoc. Professor James Rooney
School of Business (Governance), UNSW.

Ms Jo Farmer
Jo Farmer Consulting, Melbourne.

Assoc. Professor Carlo Caponecchia
School of Aviation (Health & Safety), UNSW.

Dr Vanessa McDermott
School of Business (Organisational Sociology), UNSW.

Dr Vanessa Huron
School of Business UNSW.

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