Webinar: Tackling Taboo Topics in the workplace

SPEAKERS

- Kate Went, marketing manager, scarlettabbott
- Russ Norton, head of client experience, scarlettabbott
- Debbie Bullock, wellbeing lead, Aviva
- Brenda Wong, people associate, Prolific

Kate Went

Let's get started. Thank you. Hello and welcome to another one of our Q&A sessions. We are going to be talking about tackling taboo topics in the workplace.

Do you remember when talking about your mental health at work was off limits and considered a massive overshare? Unwritten social rules dictated that certain topics were off the table. But the COVID catalyst meant that we now had a collective shorthand to point to. We were "all in the same boat". It was "okay to not be okay". But it always should have been, but the stigmas associated with taboos make them impossible to explore openly sometimes.

But now the floodgates are open. Organisations are restructuring their benefits, examining their policies and putting mental health center stage. For some, the gesture is still more performative than productive, but the conversation has well and truly started.

So what's next? From periods to politics, menopause to money? What are the taboo topics that are lurking in the shadows of our workplaces? And how can we in internal comms and HR help bring them into the night?

My name is Kate Went, I'm marketing manager at employment engagement consultancy scarlettabbott and I'm delighted to be joined by my colleague Russ Norton, who is our D&I champion. I am also really, really excited to be joined today by Brenda Wong who is people associate at Prolific and Debbie Bullock, wellbeing lead at Aviva. Thank you so much for joining us today for the conversation.

Together, we're going to explore the "tough to talk about" topics still to be tackled in our workplaces, and how we can surface them sensitively, telling stories that break stigmas.
So we really want to hear your questions. We'd love you to get involved, send them through to us throughout the session, and we'll cover as many as we can.

But before we do, I'd really like to get the panel's thoughts on how the past 18 months have perhaps changed our mindsets about particular taboo topics. Has anything become easier to talk about? And has anything become more difficult? Russ, I'm going start with you.

Russ Norton

Yeah, sure. Thanks. And it's great to be here - really excited to be talking about this topic. I think that there's been a couple of conflicting kind of trends that have happened over the last 18 months. I think, during the pandemic, we all have the chance to be more switched on and to see what was happening on social media and to see the evidence of what was out there happening to people.

And so taboo topics weren't just things that people talked about, there were things that you saw, you saw the TikToks, you saw the video footage of really awful things happening and people sharing that perspectives. At the same time, this awareness around privilege emerged, I think, and that's an interesting trend. I think before, taboo topics were more about who's different, what's hidden? And what makes people different? And what should be secret and what shouldn't be secret.

But I think the big thing that maybe was taboo that has become much less taboo was talking about privilege. And I know that I've certainly got much more comfortable saying, "Yes, I'm a gay man". And I've had some struggles as a result of my sexual orientation. But actually, I fully recognise that I'm a white, able bodied, educated man in this society. And so actually, the things that disadvantaged me are relatively minor compared to the things that I gain privilege from.

And I think people's understanding of how they are privileged is certainly coming to the fore for them through the lockdown and through the pandemic. As much as it was a great leveler, and we were all equally vulnerable to the virus, we were all able to protect ourselves in very different ways, depending on how much privilege we had. So I think that there's sort of greater awareness of the issues that minority communities are facing, but also a really big slap in the face around actually how privileged we as individuals are or aren't.

Kate Went

Absolutely, Brenda, can I come to you? Have you observed anything being talked about more, or anything that you feel is being pushed back?

Brenda Wong

I will actually agree with Russ and I also wanted to say, like, from the beginning, I'm so excited to be here with Russ and Debbie today. It's truly a great honour.

But yes, largely the same. I think that it is a lot easier to talk about privilege. It's a lot easier to talk about, like, the hidden costs of things, especially as we've seen over the past 18 months or so. Like the sheer inequalities and the bigger gaps and inequalities between, for example, men and women or between people who have caring responsibilities and people who don't have caring responsibilities.

I fear that there's a difference between being able to talk about it and actually policies being put in place to help support these folks. And I think that it is a positive trend towards being able to have conversations about it. I'm not sure whether we are actually seeing it being reflected in terms of impact and in terms of support being provided to the individuals affected It's just more out in the open that generally everybody's struggling. But, what I'm hoping for is that it's being reflected in actual policies being put in place in the workplace. I'm not 100% sure yet whether that's the case across the board.

Kate Went
Yes, absolutely. Thank you so much Brenda, And Debbie, what about you? What do you think?

Debbie Bullock
So I think the pandemic has opened people's eyes. And you're right, there has been a prevalence of talking about mental health in particular, but I think that surge was actually on the rise before the pandemic.

I tend to think things have their "moment in the sun" if you like. So, you guys probably aren't old enough. But I can remember, 30 odd years ago, when it was still not really the done thing to mention the "C word" meaning cancer. It wasn't talked about. It was hidden. And then it became very prevalent. And, you know, we talk about it a lot more. Alzheimer's and dementia had a similar journey. And mental health started to have that journey before the pandemic as well, in terms of its, you know, helped by powerful and well visual people talking about it, whether that be sports people, the Royal Family, or if it's a particular thing of somebody in power, and they set up working groups about it. That tends to get that momentum going behind a topic, which then bleeds out into the rest of society, including workplaces.

And I think those are the kinds of things that start to change the narrative, Brenda, I think you're absolutely spot on. Just because a topic becomes okay to talk about, doesn't mean we're getting to the root cause of being able to support those people. And I think that's where we need to look at individual items differently.

I think mental health organisations and workplaces are starting to think about how they support people, but there is still a risk. I don't want to tar everybody with the same brush but some organisations are going: "we've got Mental Health First Aiders - check", move on, and kind of thing. So yes, it's that. But again, it's not all parts of mental health that are becoming open and talked about. So I think, yes, the pandemic has seen us refocus. But there's a lot of things still hidden that we don't talk about, that don't come to the surface that people don't feel comfortable sharing for fear of what will happen if they do.

Brenda Wong
I think there's also a sense that senior leaders and organisations fall into two different camps. Either they are completely on board, and they take on the feedback and are able to act on, you know, the intense pressures of the past 18 months. Or they actually go the complete opposite way. And we're not going to engage with these topics. We're here to do work. And yeah, it was varying degrees of consequences. Right. But yeah, it's really interesting to see how the pandemic as a whole has really pushed people towards two ends of the extremes. Yeah, I've noticed both things happening in the past year for sure.

Kate Went

Absolutely. And I think that that split is something that we'll definitely explore in this conversation, because there's a lot to unpack around realising what camp your organisation falls into, from the leadership, and how to go about making changes around that.

And before we get into that, I had some specific questions for each of you. Do keep your questions coming to us as well, we do want to try and squeeze as many into the session as we can. But I'm going to be very selfish and just ask the things that were on my mind for each of you. Russ, I'd love to know what kind of conversations you're having with some of your clients at the moment about tackling difficult subjects. Have you seen a change recently in organisations willing to tackle tougher topics?

Russ Norton

Yeah. And so I think, for me, the interesting trend, so I work with lots of large organisations at varying different stages of their, specifically of their, diversity and inclusion journey. And D&I is becoming so much broader. And I suppose, two years ago, you had a culture team, and a wellbeing team, and a D&I team, and an engagement team. And if they were four different spotlights, now 18 months later, I think that spotlight is very much more on employee centrism.

What we need to do to make the employee experience better? That's got to be a good thing. But all those camps are at different stages of maturity. And in some cases, though, that they're almost conflicting. But from a D&I perspective, specifically, what I'm seeing is varying levels of confidence. And I think this ticks to the point that Brenda was making just there around, if we aren't fully confident to have a voice on something. It's almost easier to stay completely silent. And Kate, you and I have talked about kind of "cancel culture" in the past and the kind of the fear of saying something wrong, stopping you saying anything at all. And that almost makes the topic taboo.

So I think what I'm now starting to see is a new kind of humility, from organisations saying "we don't know the answers. We could never possibly know the answers because we're busy running a business". And actually, we're going to flip this from trying to educate you about these topics to asking you about these topics. How do they make you feel? What is it that we're getting wrong? A fantastic example of this one of our very close client relationships that we have, last week, sent out some diversity data collection. And they had Judaism listed under the faith category, but not under the race category.

And actually, that's caused some really interesting feedback to come in, around where Judaism belongs in that grey area of faith and ethnicity The organisation has responded fantastically. They've organised a podcast, they're talking to members of the Jewish community. And they're just fully open to, "we got that wrong, we did not know. And actually, it's so interesting that you've brought that to us". And rather than going, "oh, well, you know, we didn't mean to", and never saying anything on the topic again, they use it as a teachable moment and really lean into that, which I think is magnificent.

Kate Went

I absolutely love that Russ. Because, yeah, I think it's a lot of it is to do with attitude and about understanding. There is no way that we can possibly know everything, we just can't. And sometimes we will get it wrong. But if we're willing to have an open discussion, and learn and grow and bring people into the conversation, what more can you kind of ask from people because we will get it wrong? It's just guaranteed.

Brenda, you previously worked at Monzo Bank up until recently, and that's a company that started small and grew rapidly. From your perspective, do you think it's easier to talk about taboo topics in a smaller team? And does the introduction of more policies and procedures, as an organisation grows, stifle those conversations? What do you think?

Brenda Wong

What an interesting question. Yes, I recently left Monzo Bank. I was there for three and a half years, I've joined a lovely company called Prolific, and we're trying to empower world changing research. So yes, I've gone from a team of like, 1500 people when I left Monza bank, to about 70 people, which is a really big change. But I think it's actually, you know, as I start to feel my way through my organisation, it's not as different as I thought it was going to be.

But because it's not really about the size of the organisation, it's about your internal company values and how you actually embed them into the rest of the company. So if we have an organisation that prides itself on transparency, prides itself on belonging, I think like it, it does vary. So for example, in Monzo Bank, we had specific employee resource groups that were public and open for anybody to join and educate themselves. And then we also had private Slack channels.

For example, my favourite one was "period diaries", where anybody who has a period can join and talk about their periods or endometriosis, or, you know, what foods they're craving on a particular day, just open to everybody who has a period. But that's very much a safe space for them. It's not necessarily something that we can do at an organisation of Prolific size for now, because just for the sheer size differences. I think that it depends on the situation.

We had a diversity survey go out recently at Prolific. And there were some concerns that because of our size, it's very easy to identify certain people. I am a woman of colour, I'm an immigrant. I belong to the LGBTQI+ community, and there's not a lot of me. Absolutely, not yet anyway - we're working on it. But we I have to accept that, you know, in terms of the surveys, that it's probably easy to point at my data point and go, "I think I know that who that is." But then our responsibility as a company is to prove to the organisation as a whole, that that data is safe and that we're not using it for any purposes except for trying to macro improve diversity and inclusion gaps in the organisation. And that we're using this information for good and I think the only way that we can do that is to live our company values of trust and friendliness on a day to day basis because culture is not just putting values on a wall and leaving them there.

It's the tiny little actions that individuals do each day that you can't see. So it's up to us as a HR department to be able to live those every day.

Kate Went

Thank you so much, Brenda. And Debbie, I'd love to know about your role as wellbeing leader of Aviva in the last year. Have you seen conversations, particularly around mental health, change? Is your remit changing as a result of that?

Debbie Bullock

I think we were lucky at Aviva pre-pandemic, that we had a well-established wellbeing programme, before the pandemic. And that certainly made it easier when the pandemic arrived to make sure that colleagues had access to the support they might need. But obviously, yes, the wellbeing programme has changed. There are things we're doing virtually now that we used to do face-to-face and vice-versa.

And, you know, we're constantly listening to the issues that are coming from our colleagues and how we can provide support to address new and emerging trends and issues that just didn't exist pre-pandemic, whether that be mental, physical, financial, or social wellbeing and any element of that. And I think wellbeing, large organisations are changing their view on wellbeing, in the fact that those who weren't on it before, are now beginning to realise that it's certainly a corporate essential, rather than a "nice to have". So those who might have been in the slightly cynical camp before or they said, "yes, if we've got some money, we'll do this. But if it's tight, we won't" kind of camp have moved into: "Actually, we really need to do that".

And I think, particularly for any organisation in the service industry, where people, you know, when you interact with Aviva, or any kind of service organisation, there's no end product for you to take home as a consumer at the end of it, you know, so your interaction with that organisation is, is with the people, so your people are your greatest asset. So how you communicate with them, and how you look after them is really important.

And I think from a mental health perspective, the mental wellbeing of people has changed throughout the pandemic, but we need to be mindful that not just to assume that's always negative. So for some of our colleagues, their mental health has actually improved. Because some of their issues might have been, the journey to work wasn't something that they were comfortable with, or their self image wasn't something they're comfortable with. So actually being able to be at home has helped improve their mental wellbeing. Neurodiverse colleagues may find different settings more conducive to support their overall wellbeing.

So I think, don't get me wrong, there are definitely struggles with the pandemic for some people, for them for their mental wellbeing, but equally, it's had a positive impact for some. But yes, I'm busier than I ever have been. And, you know, being very good at leading by example in managing my own work-life balance, or, as I call it, how my work life integrates, to make sure that there's a good balance. And so yes.

Kate Went

I absolutely love that as well. And yeah, I can imagine you are busy right now, but doing very important work, which is so valuable, particularly right now.

I couldn't really go into a session about taboo topics without mentioning the recent Basecamp controversy, which has fascinated me. And it kind of highlight an extreme end of the spectrum when a business decides, not

only to not encourage space for difficult subjects to be discussed, but to actually actively discourage it. It may sound obvious, but I'd like to ask, what are the implications of a decision like this?

And I'll start with Russ, because I know you were recently talking with a colleague about this for a podcast. So maybe while it's fresh in your mind?

Russ Norton
Hmm. I mean, the interesting thing for me is that they are a team of 57 right, and 20 people have left as a result of Basecamp's announcement that they will no longer make space for political discussion on internal or external channels. "We're going to cancel all of our committees, including the DNI committee". And there are other project management software providers who have now got some excellent and talented staff knocking on their doors to say, "hey, please, can I come and work for you instead?"

Again, let's remember that being able to hand your notice in is a privilege. Being able to quit and walk out is an absolute privilege. And there may well be people who are still at Basecamp and stuck there, if you like. And so I think is a teachable moment, looking at some of the fallout and some of the reactions. And it's very much around the fact that that announcement was made public externally first before it was made internally was one of the biggest issues that really upset people. And the fact that it was in the spirit of 20 people and volunteered for a D&I committee. And this D&I committee had found a Slack channel internally that had some, some fairly inappropriate stuff in it, they'd flagged it. And the organisation, rather than going, "great shout, this isn't really acceptable", or maybe it would have been culturally acceptable 10-15 years ago, but it's not right anymore. Instead, they just kind of went, "nah, just cancel everything: cancel, the channels, cancel the committees. Like, blinkers on, let's just focus on our product. We're a business we don't exist to It's almost the polar extreme.

It's the complete other end of the spectrum, like Brenda was talking about again earlier. Kind of, that's how bad it could be, if you aren't willing to take that approach of humility. And what can we learn from this? What are our employees telling us? Why would we ever block that conversation? How could blocking the conversation ever be more powerful than allowing the conversation? And are we really that closed down to change, that we would rather lose 20 talented people than have an open and honest conversation about beliefs and opinions and make space to talk about topics that people might feel are taboo.

I suppose the final point on that is that those conversations are probably happening anyway. And a lot of people are talking about the loss of the watercooler moment. But we've got WhatsApp, we've got Twitter, we've got Facebook, we've got LinkedIn, we've got Teams messages, we've got phone calls. These conversations are happening.

The best quote I ever heard was: "It's better to be slapped in the face on your Intranet than stabbed in the back on LinkedIn or Glassdoor?" So, make the space for that conversation to happen internally, where you can own it. And you can, you've got some influence, and you can kind of have that conversation with your employees, rather than locking it down and your employees just spreading it all over the internet that it's not a nice place work.

Kate Went

Absolutely, I'd forgotten about that quote. And I absolutely love that! It's so true. A survey - I did some research ahead of this session. And when I was doing that, one of the, sort of, pieces that I read highlighted that some of the highest ranking taboos of the workplace at the moment are mental health, racial bias, sexual harassment, religion, politics, and financial issues.

All of these, I would say, have in one way or another come to the fore, particularly in the last year with the BLM, with #MeToo, with Sarah Everrard. With the general pandemic's impact upon our mental health, all of these things are dominating the news cycles, dominating our newsfeeds, bleeding into our lives from all directions. Is this the time now for workplaces to really take a look at these things and have the conversations with people? And is it all of those things? Is it some of those things? Where do you start? Anyone got any thoughts?

Debbie Bullock

I'm gonna dive in on that one. And I think what's really important about any workplace is you create a place of psychological safety, where you can talk about whether it's with your leader, or in an open forum, or with an employee resource group or somewhere that you feel comfortable to talk about any number of things. And that's not just about personal taboo subjects, either.

So if you've messed up at work, and you're in a culture where you can actually say, you know, I've done this, then, you know, without fear. So, using it as a teachable moment, you know, something to learn from, rather than fearing that you're going to get blamed or you know, penalised slapped about or whatever, for getting it wrong. And so it applies as much to that kind of environment as it does to, I need to talk to someone about you know, the menopause, I want to talk to my leader about "I have an eating disorder" or other things - domestic abuse. There are so many topics, but at the core of it, if you can create a culture of psychological safety, where people feel that they can bring up a topic without fear of negative implications, not in the now but also for that long-term career at that organisation, that's got to be at the core, at the heart.

We're going back to what Brenda was talking about culture, you know, that kind of thing. You've got to have that at the heart of your organisation. And then any of those topics, in theory, become not taboo. I'm personally one thats: "we are one human being". Everyone talks about, "oh, well, when was it a personal problem?" "Was it a work problem?" We have one brain, it's not compartmentalized into, "this is a problem and, and it only impacts me at home", or "this is a problem, and it only impacts me when I'm out partying". We have one whole person.

So, whatever the thing, it's going to impact everywhere across our lives. And as a result, you need to be able to fit that in and talk about it, whatever the context. And so for me, that psychological safety, it's got to be at the crux of an organisation. And the things you should be looking at is how you can make it clear. And the way you make some of that clear is by opening up conversations and having people talking about it at all levels, and across all channels. So that people know where to go and where to get things. That key for me.

Brenda Wong

If I may add something. I totally agree with what Debbie is saying and I really love the angle of, like, being able to have these conversations kind of one-to-one in a safe space. And being able to facilitate those, just on a practical level for almost like the macro internal comms.

I think there is something to be said about, like, which topics should we go for? Because I think like, depending on your resources, depending on time, depending on the size of the organisation, tackling every single ill of the world is extremely daunting, right? And what events do you go to? Do you go to all the Prides? Do you go to none of them? Like it's a quite a difficult discussion.

I think, from my perspective, what I used to do at Monzo is that we would go, "Cool, let's focus on the big flagship events." But if somebody would like to like to suggest to us, "hey, let's take a look into this", we'd have a discussion about budget, or if we can't do an event, like let's work together on a blog post for educational purposes, or we can run an internal webinar. So let's work with the resources we have to increase representation and education and allyship across the org. So I think that is what we would do from a practical level, because you can't tackle every single topic. I mean, hopefully you can, but the intention is to provide an environment in which somebody can go, "Hey, I would really like to talk about this", or "I would like to see more representation here". "It should come from me, because I'm part of this group, I'm happy to work with you". And to be able to facilitate that and empower people to talk about it.

So I remember working with a colleague to speak about Ramadan, for example, because she was like, I don't think we've ever actually spoken about this organisation-wide. And I was like, yes, it definitely shouldn't come from me, would you like to draft it? We'll do it together. And I think that is the small little things we can do to add psychological safety into the org.

Debbie Bullock

That's great. And we've seen some of that coming through as well with the use of Yammer within our organisation.

So people start threads and topics about the things that are pertinent to them, you know, because they're from that group, or that culture or that environment, They might put some education up there, you know, it might be their thoughts, and so many other colleagues then engage going, "Wow, I didn't really know that much about that. That's fascinating. Thanks for sharing", you know, and the fact that they feel comfortable to be able to post that and then get a supportive and positive response is what you really after in an organisation.

It's that, "wow, I didn't know that!" I've learned so much in the last three, four years, just in general about so many topics, you know, and yet, I've probably only scratched the surface, and there's many, many more things that I still need to learn, and learning should be lifelong. You know, we're all learning all of the time. There's no-one that that could ever, on this earth, say they know everything.

Russ Norton

I think it's really interesting, that piece around it starting with employees, starting with the people that that represent that characteristic.

And I often talk to IC teams who want to do stories and they're like, "where do I find these people? How do I start this process of asking someone to put their neck on the line, if you will, and be brave enough to speak up and share their story?" And actually, we often say, find one or two and they'll be in the networks, they'll probably be the people that are posting on your intranet anyway. Or maybe they're on LinkedIn. Anyway, work with those people to become role models that show what great looks like, because it is scary. And there is that fear of trolling and there is that fear of someone concealing you or always labelling you with that characteristic forever onwards.

I do think it's the responsibility of IC teams to helps set the context for those stories and help coach those people through that experience and not, kind of, use them as an opportunity like, oh fantastic, I've got a great person, and we're going to put them in a spotlight and they're going to be plastered across all our posters forevermore, because they were the volunteered to speak about this one topic. But if you can find that balance, and work with those people, it really sets the precedent. I'd be saying that more and more people hopefully come forward.

Brenda Wong

Totally like have your internal comms champions. but make sure that we're not using these lovely people, and in a tokenistic kind of way, absolutely. But also, maybe bringing in senior leaders to be like, we are truly an ally about this. This is what I've learned about this, and this is what I'm going to share with you. It's all opportunities for internal employee branding, which is always something that we want to do, right?

Kate Went

Absolutely. I think, with a lot of these topics, IC can drive such a lot of the activity and can do an awful lot of groundwork and open the doors to the conversations. But we talk, also, a lot about the important role of the line manager in an organisation and what they drive and what their role is. Being, as my colleague puts it, the buckle in the belt, the bit that's connecting everything. Is there work to do in educating and empowering and supporting the line managers within an organisation, and leaders, to have those conversations with their teams? And how do we do that? Where do we start?

Debbie Bullock

I think that's definite. So, across Aviva, In the UK, we have two and a half thousand colleagues who are people leaders, you know. So, that's a vast population of colleagues and one of my people function colleagues always used to say, "we are only as good as our worst people leader". That was his favourite phrase. And, you know becoming a people leader is a skill in itself, you know. Not just in the day-to-day management of things, but being able to have the skills to open and address, and know how to do the conversation.

We at Aviva have ever been producing some guidance and support and training for our people leader population, for quite some time, and that's been evolving. So we've had mental health awareness training for

our people leaders since 2017. And that gets some of the highest rated reviews on that piece of training. That was face-to-face, it's now virtual face-to-face, if you see what I mean. It's not an online package, although we do have online support. But we've also got now training for people on neurodiverse conditions on how to support someone if they share with you that they're suffering from domestic abuse, be that physical, emotional, or financial. We've got support on the menopause, we've got race and anti racism training.

And while they're aimed quite often at people leaders, they are open to everyone who wants to educate themselves on how to support people. We've recently issued some guidance on what to say if someone tells you they're not okay.

So there's been, particularly through the pandemic, but before then, an increasing encouragement for people to say "it's okay to say you're not okay". But did we give enough support to the people who might be hearing that message? Probably not. So we've tried to play catch up a little bit there too. Because not many people leaders are trained counsellors, so if someone comes to you and says, "No, I'm actually really not okay" - and that can be a quite serious "not okay", as well, you know? And then, you know, most people go, "oh, heck, what now?" kind of thing. So how can we support people leaders and others in that?

I think training and support is essential, Kate, Yes. Because it's not an easy task. And there are so many demands placed on line managers that we need to be thoughtful of their wellbeing as well. I don't know, Brenda. What do you have and do to support in your areas?

Brenda Wong
I mean, first of all, I'm just delighted to hear about what Aviva has to offer. It's just like, so wonderful to see just the sheer empathy and care that you have for your employees. It's just super inspiring.

Totally agree. I think just to add to that I think there also needs to be set policies and precedents about what to do when somebody says they're not okay. Right. So like, can we give them extended time off beyond what's statutory, for example? Is there a precedent for that? Just so that, you know, while we're living in this. There's a horrible time at the moment, do they have the financial security to be able to be not okay for a longer period of time? Because there's no set time limit for you not being okay.

So I think, I've certainly had conversations or seen folks who go, "I'm just gonna take two weeks and I'm going to be back" and it's like, well, sometimes it's just not that linear. I personally took a whole month off in December, because I just could not cope with everything, right? I came back and I was okay, but what if I wasn't okay at the end of the month? You know, I think we need to prepare managers for that conversation. But also like, at the top going, like, if we see this trend happening across the board, what can we agree to? And what can we do to support people if we're seeing more and more this kind of stuff happening?

I worked in L&D for a long time once. So, training and support is something I'm super passionate about. But it has to be backed up with, "can we actually support this on a macro scale?" Yeah, I think that's really important, too.

Russ Norton

I think there's a really interesting question, certainly, now, and I think since kind of Christmas time, certainly talking to the organisations that I work with, there is this idea of being at capacity, or even over capacity.

Debbie was talking earlier about really managing the work/home integration. And I think that's an individual responsibility to manage our own workload, our own work life balance. But there has to be that permission, there has to be the flexibility, because part of the reason that people are afraid to take time off for their own wellbeing is that perceived impact on their colleagues that, "Crikey, if I drop everything for a month, I'm going to dump a load of stuff on my colleagues who are also near burnout". And so actually, if we are all operating at 95 - 100% capacity, and people start to drop, well, that's a real organisational risk.

We need to collectively get comfortable with this idea of being 80% capacity is 100% capacity, because that allows for conversations, that allows for learning, that allows for mentoring, that allows for the time that people need to digest and learn in different ways. But that's quite a tough gig for a senior leadership team with shareholder expectations weighing heavily on their shoulders, to say, "Hey, no, we're totally fine with our organisation dropping 20% capacity to allow for our people to feel at their best." And that's going to take some brave organisations to step up and go, "you know what shareholders? You're going to get a bit less money this year, because we'll actually prioritise our people for a bit".

Debbie Bullock

I think one of the interesting things, and I can't remember where I read it, but it was, it's definitely been in the last four weeks or so about hybrid working and, you know, the split of everything. And the phrase it used was: "So when we're in the office, we can 'hyper collaborate' and when we're working from home, we can 'hyper focus'." And I'm like, "hyper"?

It just creates this, you know, "we've got to be 'so fully focused', when we're at home and 'so fully collaborating' when we're - Yorkshire accent's coming out really strong here when I get emotive. It's just like, "why does it have to be hyper?" You know, it's just the adding of that additional word. It's that pressure, that overload that comes from that, and it's, like, totally unnecessary.

It's like, working from home might be a time when you want to do some reports and some focused work and working in the office, you might want to collaborate. Why did we need to add the "hyper" word? And it's to your capacity perspective, it's just like, everyone has to be 120% peak performance at all times. Is not sustainable by anyone.

Kate Went

I think you add "hyper" you run the risk of going into "hyper disengagement" and nobody wants that.

And to speak on the point about capacity, definitely after this last year, a massive spotlight has been shone onto the internal comms function within organisations. And just how important this function, and in collaboration with the teams around it, have been in keeping everybody together. But along with that spotlight, comes scrutiny and comes pressure and comes, "what's the return on investment?"

So in organisations, where we have leaders who are empathetic to tackling taboo topics, but don't see necessarily the monetary value in shining a light on them, when there is so much else going on? How do we build the business case for these sorts of conversations and campaigns?

Russ Norton

So I think it's a really tough one, because it's a journey that we've been on, for example, with D&I. We had to build the business case for D&I and persuade people that diverse teams were more productive, and there will be greater innovation. And I know it's almost become a bit cliche now, whereas actually, it's kind of inclusive and where people belong is where the best results come from. It's not just about shipping in a load of different people, and hoping that they will get on with each other.

I feel like organisations need to really focus on what is it that they hold valuable and talk about that and measure that. And my favourite example is Netflix, who value creativity over everything. So they stripped away all their policies. They said there's no there's no holiday policy. Take as much holiday as you feel you need. There's no expenses policy. Spend money in the best interest of Netflix. And of course, there is a framework around that to make sure that anyone who fiddles the system is removed swiftly and dealt with. But that empowerment is handed over, because they set their expectations and what they want, and make those very, very clear.

So I think if the expectation on people is to deliver results and profit, then that's what people are going to drive towards, because that's what's measured. That's what's celebrated. Whereas if, you know, a culture like Aviva where it's about service, and it's about excellent experience, it's just people's mindsets. How are we going to deliver the best possible experience? And the profit will come. And I think that it's just a different way of teeing up what we hold to be important. And again, it's not about painting the values on the wall, hoping that everyone adheres to them. It's about sustained focus on the things that really matter. And if you focus on the things that really matter, they will become true.

Debbie Bullock

I think the other element from an internal comms perspective, and, you know, how do they justify spending their resource time delivering these kinds of messages and supporting this, as opposed to a more traditional business message?

My pushback on that would always be, "what would happen if we didn't?" Because that's actually the position. If we don't, what is the business at risk of, and I think that in itself is a justification. And that always reminds me of something once about training. What if we train this person and spend all this money on them? And then they leave? And then, it's like, and what if you don't spend the money on them and then they stay?

And I think the conversation around investing organisational time and energy and resource, whether that be internal comms or other in addressing some of these issues that underpin the overall wellbeing and contentedness, which ultimately impacts performance of the individual is, if you don't have those conversations? What could happen? So, I think that's the lens I would encourage people to look at it is: if you don't, then you know, what might happen

Brenda Wong

For business case purposes, it's super important to be able to back it up with data. So like, if you're measuring your eNPS, ask specific questions about, "we did this, what did you think about this?" and start building on things that are super quantifiable for the senior leadership team, because you know, ultimately, it is also our job to convince them. But there is like a really big reason why we should be doing these things we just need to, perhaps strategically add some numbers to them.

Kate Went

Absolutely love that. And, as Chris has mentioned in the chat, "as we say here, bringing your whole self to work can only help people perform and lead to improvements across the group". I love that. And I think that is where we're going to end the session today. I'm conscious of time. But thank you so much to everyone who joined us today and listened to the conversation.

Thank you so much, Russ, Debbie, Brenda, for your insights, your experiences and being so generous with your time. So thank you so much. I will send the recording of the session and the timestamps out afterwards. But in the meantime, thank you so much, and hope to see you at another session.