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Occupational Mental Health and Safety Reporting

Introduction

I'm interested in the accessibility and accuracy of ASIO's public reportage of occupational health and safety [OH&S] issues within the organisation. I don't believe a secretive organisation has to be shy about exposing its health in public. I'm particularly interested in ASIO's reportage of how it:

- 1.monitors, measures and discloses levels of occupational stress, frequency of critical incidents and severity of traumatic responses to those incidents amongst employees of the organisation
- 2.reports its general compliance with best practice Occupational Health and Safety standards and
- 3.documents its specific protocols for dealing with life threatening incidents involving its own officers and members of the public adversely affected by its operations, and reports on the occasions where they are exercised
- 4.documents and costs its commitment to the provision of a work environment friendly to disclosure of trauma and injury and supportive of recovery from injury at work [eg by providing critical incident stress debriefing provided routinely in similar organisations overseas]
- 5.reports how it uses its sophisticated psychological profiling skills and psychology staff resources to identify and assist staff currently suffering from diagnosable mental disorders, inoculate employees from the effects of prospective trauma and protect staff whose personalities make them vulnerable to developing post traumatic stress disorder.
- 6.reports on the number of and cost of maintaining staff on stress leave or who are given a voluntary retirement package because of stress, so that an accurate comparison can be made with the costs of prevention and provision of all of the above
- 7.reports the costs of OH&S compliance and the costs of testing their compliance with OH&S practices eg through litigation such as the case of AXA, the judicial report of which may be found at this url:
<http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/disp.pl/au/cases/cth/aat/1999/917.html?query=%7e+aat+asio+axa>
- 8.reports its compliance with Australia's international treaties on human rights and human rights violations both in carrying out its own operations and protecting the human rights of its staff.

As a Clinical Psychologist in private practice in Canberra, I have been treating the ASIO officer who is referred to as 'AXA' in the Administrative Appeals Tribunal case referred to above. It has raised a number of issues for me which has both increased my respect and admiration for the work of ASIO but also raised my concerns as a citizen about how it deals with casualties within its own organisation.

ASIO may already measure levels of staff stress and morale.

De-facto Reporting OH&S practices and procedures in AAT

The AAT findings in AXA's case are a de-facto public report of the handling of one OH&S case in their organisation. The fact that a self-evidently work related traumatic injury leading to PTSD reached the AAT for it to decide if the injury was work related, as well as the facts of the case do not reflect well on the organisation's compliance with OH&S practices and procedures. In this case, if the relevant protocol had been implemented when the officer first reported the threatening phone calls, the case would never have developed to such an expensive loss for both the organisation and for the man himself.

Public reporting of prevention strategies

I presume ASIO has psychological profiles and psychometric assessments of all their employees. If so, they could use the information therein to assess each employees vulnerability and susceptibility to adverse reactions to traumatic stress. This could form the basis of a stress inoculation program which may significantly alter the risk to their staff of developing post traumatic stress. At the very least it may prevent vulnerable staff from being in the path of a likely traumatic incident [to the extent that a critical incident is foreseeable in their line of work]. This is increasingly the approach of the US Armed Services, see <http://www.ncptsd.org/> as a starting point. *I recommend that ASIO be required to report on this aspect of their OH&S responsibilities in detail.*

Detailed public reporting would inspire confidence

I believe that if ASIO was required to audit, report and cost its compliance with OH&S policies, practices and procedures and give case examples of where and how these have been applied in the previous 12 months, it would both increase public confidence in the organisation's ability to care for its own injured and empower its staff to engage those procedures where appropriate. This may then have implications for how ASIO discharges its responsibilities to the community, some members of whom may be targets of its activities.

Reporting could effect culture change in the organisation

Furthermore, I believe that more open reporting of OH&S matters would go some way to facilitating change in the culture of an organisation which may view work related injury as a weakness and something to be hidden from peers and supervisors. About 8% of UN Peacekeepers develop PTSD from witnessing or being involved in the violent events around them. Although the majority of people experiencing trauma will not develop PTSD, many will develop other anxiety disorders, alcohol or drug dependence, depression and hostility often directed at those nearest and dearest to them.

It's a fair guess to assume that other ASIO staff are sometimes exposed to the risk of witnessing or being subjected to violence as was AXA. *In an ideal world, I would recommend an annual epidemiological survey of the current mental health of the organisation's staff be conducted and reported annually by ASIO.* One could conceivably set mental health performance targets as a subset of productivity gains since the two are so closely associated in the Australian workplace.

Reporting prevention strategies

Crucial to recovery from trauma in the work place are:

- the level of social support following trauma
- validation of the trauma experience
- opportunities to process the trauma.

Each of these were in my opinion, poorly supplied in the case of AXA and I believe that the extent of the lack of those strategies in his case, may be a measure of the culture's general denial of work place psychological injury, rather than its specific difficulties with this one case. I believe this demonstrated denial by senior management of the significant risk that one ASIO staff member undertook in fulfilling his daily duty. Denial may be a culturally approved response to trauma, however, it is not therapeutic. *I recommend ASIO report the details of its ongoing and preventative approaches to work related trauma and other mental health issues and its progress in measuring and changing this hypothesised culture of denial.*

An effect of ASIO work is to prevent traumatic incidents in the community

One way of viewing ASIO's mission is to prevent the occurrence of violence in the community and thus of trauma. It could, therefore, as part of its mission become an expert on the causes and nature of trauma, both psychological and physical. Their current mission is to provide timely and accurate intelligence about people and organisations who pose a risk to the safety and security of Australians, their governments, their public and private organisations. They should as a consequence be sensitive to the risks to their own employees of fulfilling that task by providing timely and accurate intelligence about traumatic risks to those staff engaged in all of its activities. In a sense, one can measure ASIO's effectiveness by the low levels of terrorist, anti-government and anti-establishment violence in our community. Cognisance of the incidence of traumatic stress in its own organisation might lead staff engaged in operations to be aware of the risk its operations pose to both themselves and those targets of its interest. *I recommend ASIO assess and report on these risks and how they are dealt with.* I believe in doing so it would inspire respect for ASIO's mission in the community.

Human rights violations

Further to the above I am concerned that ASIO may at times have to commence covert operations against a suspect individual or organisation. I welcome them doing so. However, in pursuing that mission they may inadvertently violate a citizen's human rights.

I believe demonstrable evidence of their human rights record and therefore, sensitivity to human rights violations can be found in how they treat their own staff whose rights have been violated and publically report on it. Critical incidents which lead to traumatic injury are in effect a human rights violation. Human rights violations are generally traumatic.

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