

WORK SMART, NOT HARDER

Merryl Semple is helping improve productivity and happiness in the workplace in a post-COVID world.

WORDS BY DONNA DUGGAN

Most people go to work, wanting to do a good job. And the way they can do that is if they feel their capabilities are a good fit for the task, and that they have a level of control over the way they work with that task, says Merryl Semple, Director of Insync Consulting. “People can work hard under pressure, but they have a zone of peak performance. Beyond that they can’t work any faster or harder, there’s no more mental, physical or emotional energy they can provide. It’s at this point that they need a period of rest and recovery. Unfortunately, often in the modern workplace, there is no such recovery period. The work keeps piling up and we find ourselves not thriving on the challenges but reacting to them and experiencing fatigue and eventually burnout.”

Prior to running her own consultancy business for leadership development and facilitating resilience in the workplace, Semple found herself in burnout in a management role. “I know how destructive burnout is on mental and emotional health, on our ability to perform at work and how it disconnects us from relationships,” she says.

“My coping strategy was to shut my emotions down so I didn’t feel overwhelmed. I became reserved, fatigued and lost all sense of joy in life. All my vitality was sucked away by the burnout.” When she left the organisation, she was able to see clearly that churn and burn is the death of vitality and engagement in an organisation. “I learnt what is needed to keep a workforce energised under pressure and enable people to embrace challenges and remain engaged.” She says the first sign that you are

losing control is that you start letting things go. “Usually what we let slip first are relationships because we have such due diligence to perform at work. You may not meet a friend for dinner because you are too tired, or you say to your partner, ‘You take the kids to the park because I’ve had a rough week’. So the very things that would energise you – like fresh air, exercise and socialising – you give away because you are too tired. Semple says that is the time to put into place strategies that help you recharge. “At times you have to ask for support, sometimes there need to be robust conversations in the

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workplace about what’s possible, rather than just keep on taking on more tasks. If you don’t put in strategies for emotional support, you can go on a downward spiral. The more tired you become, the less productive you become.”

The focus of Semple’s work is to build a resilient workforce that enables people to be calm under pressure, to know how to keep mental and emotional buoyancy in the midst of challenging circumstances and to learn how to build resilience in the moment. “For me, resilience is emotional buoyancy, mental clarity and connection. If you have those three things, you feel good about life and you feel you have a greater sense of control.”




Semple finds that most people can’t wait for the day to finish, or the weekend to come – a time in the future to restore their health and wellbeing. Her work focuses on the need to do something at the moment you start to feel emotionally drained. “My work teaches people to pay attention to emotional slides. If your energy is feeling drained, do something straight away to boost your vitality. Simple stretch breaks work. Step away from your desk and eat lunch [or] go outside and walk for 10 minutes. It’s emotional tension that drains your energy and vitality. Connect and collaborate. Seek support. When you focus on releasing tension in your body, you achieve greater mental clarity and you are more productive.”

The economic impact of COVID-19 has deeply affected many workplaces. “It has been difficult for many people to deliver work productively, as well as manage home affairs and relationships. And of course, certain industries were hit hard with unemployment,” says Semple. “However, it’s also brought us closer to each other; recognising the humanity in all of us and we’ve softened our professional demarcations between home and work.” As we move into a post-COVID environment, Semple says there is a call for leaders who respect those in charge of delivering their results. Leaders who listen, acknowledge and support.

Leaders who can connect with others through compassion and optimism. Leaders who don’t blame but seek to energise creativity and engagement through ensuring clarity of direction, a sense of belonging.

“A lot of people are fatigued from the stress of 2020. There’s a low energy because they are still working out what the future is because it’s not clear. As long as the leadership message is inclusive, people will feel buoyed by this.”

Semple believes everyone can benefit from learning the skills of emotion regulation. This involves paying attention to your emotional response to a circumstance and whether or not it’s working for you. If your emotional response, for example, is shutting down emotionally, continually rehashing the drama of a situation, blocking mental clarity or disconnecting you from others, you – and your work – will benefit from a different response, such as letting the physical tension go, taking a big picture perspective or talking to someone you trust.

“This will give you mental clarity and emotional buoyancy for the challenges of delivering results,” says Semple. 

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