

TIP SHEET 8

Role clarity, role conflict and work-related stress

Poorly defined or conflicted roles in a person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) can be a stressor for workers. Poor role definition arises from a lack of clarity in workers' objectives, key accountabilities, their co-workers' expectations of them and the overall scope or responsibilities of their job. Role conflict occurs when a worker is required to perform a role that goes against their personal values or when their job demands are incompatible.

Possible solutions

Decisions need to be made about what practical solutions (control measures) will be used in the workplace to prevent, eliminate or minimise the effect of work-related stressors on worker health.

At the organisational level, controls target the work itself and focus on job design, work environment and working conditions.

For the risk factor 'poor role clarity and role conflict', organisational level solutions should address workers' understanding of their role within the workgroup and the PCBU, and the potential for expectations placed on them to conflict.

Role clarity

A wide range of work situations can create role confusion, such as beginning a new job, starting in a new organisation, a transfer, a new supervisor or manager or following a change in the structure of a work unit. Lack of role clarity can lead to tension and conflict between workers.

Refer to Tip Sheet 9 – Managing relationships.

The following may help to manage this stressor:

- Provide all workers with a corporate induction and ensure they are aware of their role within their immediate work team or unit, program area and the broader organisation.
- Ensure all workers receive suitable training for their jobs.
- Assist workers to develop personal work plans that clearly define task objectives and expected outputs.
- Develop and maintain a working environment where workers are consulted and can provide feedback on changes impacting on their job tasks.
- Implement a performance feedback system, where workers receive regular feedback on jobs well done and any areas for improvement.
- Encourage workers to talk to their supervisor or manager early if they are unclear about the scope and/or responsibilities of their role.
- Ensure workers have an up to date role or position description, which includes the role purpose, reporting relationships and the key duties expected of them.
- Ensure that management structures across the organisation and reporting lines within work teams are clear. This will help workers know who they are accountable to and where they can go for help with work problems.
- Provide an organisational chart that gives a clear view of the organisational structure and communication channels.

- Following an organisational change or restructure, check with workers to ensure they understand any additional responsibilities or duties that are required of them. Revise position descriptions to reflect new accountabilities.
- It is important workers feel confident and capable of undertaking new or revised tasks. Make sure they receive enough training for them to be competent in their roles.
- Where a change in structure or roles occurs, or re-training is required, use the performance review process as a positive opportunity for workers to have renewed input to the way they complete their work.
- Ensure systems are in place to enable workers to raise concerns about any conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities. For example, hold regular team meetings to enable workers to discuss any potential role conflict.
- If possible, avoid assigning roles to workers that conflict with their personal needs and values.

At the individual level, solutions are aimed at assisting individuals to cope or build resilience.

Appropriate activities and assistance to be considered at this level of intervention include:

- corporate induction programs
- access to employee assistance programs
- training about resilience
- health and wellbeing programs
- counselling/therapy for people experiencing distress from sources both in and outside of the workplace.

Role conflict

Role conflict occurs when workers are given different and incompatible roles at the same time, or their role overlaps with another worker or work group. The greater the role conflict, the higher the likelihood of a worker experiencing work-related stress.

Ways to manage role conflict:

- Avoid placing inconsistent demands on workers and ensure that as far as possible the different requirements are compatible.
- Have clear reporting relationships so that workers know who they are directly accountable to. Where possible, avoid making workers accountable to more than one immediate supervisor to reduce potential conflict in work demands.

This tip sheet is one of 12 that refer to work-related stress. For more detail, go to workcover.nsw.gov.au

1. Overview of work-related stress
2. A risk management approach to work-related stress
3. Implementing a work-related stress risk management process
4. Risk factors for work-related stress
5. Work demands and work-related stress
6. Levels of control and work-related stress
7. Support from supervisors and/or co-workers regarding work-related stress
8. Role clarity, role conflict and work-related stress
9. Managing relationships and work-related stress
10. Recognition and reward – minimising work-related stress
11. Managing change and work-related stress
12. Organisational justice and work-related stress

This document was developed by Workplace Health & Safety QLD, Department of Justice and Attorney General worksafe.qld.gov.au

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