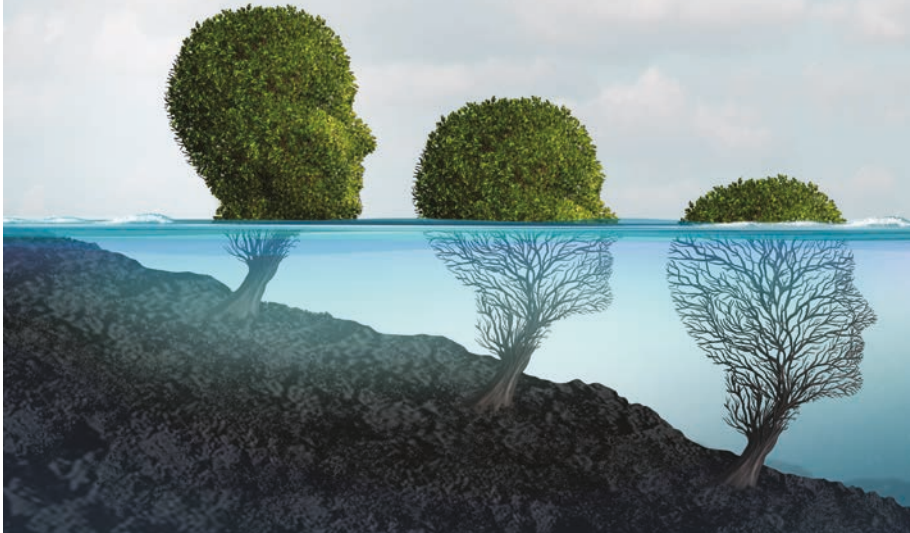


Life in the law

Taking action on culture change in the legal sector is imperative says Elizabeth Rimmer



© Brain light / Alamy Stock Photo

Last month was Mental Health Awareness Week, where there is always lots of encouraging activity, discussion and sharing about wellbeing in the law. This year, following on from the findings of our Life in the Law research (bit.ly/3adu7lg), we joined forces with the Law Society to make a renewed call for change for culture in the law. While the tide is definitely turning, it's important that we don't just talk about these issues during 'special' weeks. What we really need is action, small steps every day from everyone working in the profession to begin to steer the ship in a different direction. Soon there may be a regulatory imperative for firms to take this seriously, with the SRA's proposed changes to its rules that would reinforce its powers to deal with risks to clients and the public when these stem from a poor work culture in law firms.

It can seem overwhelming to know where to start, and culture change won't happen overnight, but if all of us start to make changes it can only be a positive thing for individuals, businesses and the sector as a whole.

Ask for input from all areas

Those in management and leadership roles have a particularly important part to play in bringing about culture change. However, for effective change, legal professionals at all levels within an organisation should be asked for their input into policies and practices that affect wellbeing. Diversity of thought and perspectives means organisations are better able to find creative solutions. Ask people what they think would make a difference to the culture of the firm and start to act on it.

Challenge stigma

The stigma that surrounds speaking about wellbeing concerns at work, silences people from seeking help. Legal professionals fear that speaking up will compromise their legal careers, so we must continue to encourage open and honest discussions about wellbeing that challenge these negative perceptions and encourage working environments where legal professionals feel they can speak up about concerns without judgment. It's particularly important for those in training to see more senior leaders talk about challenges they've had and how they overcame them.

See the individual

Wellbeing cannot be seen in isolation and is inseparable from other multiple factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, stage of career and practice area. Everyone has different needs and requirements when it comes to wellbeing and may excel or struggle in different areas. Working practices and support programmes need to recognise that not everyone may want to work at home for example, or feel able to access support from an EAP service. Ask people what they need.

Act on bad behaviour

Positive social behaviours need to be embedded in the culture of law, acting with civility and respect for colleagues every day. Life in the Law research found that almost one in four legal professionals who took part in the research had been bullied, harassed or discriminated against at work. A bully can singlehandedly change the culture to a negative environment

which will negatively affect the business. In fact, the SRA is looking at introducing explicit obligations in the Codes of Conduct for both firms and individuals to treat colleagues fairly and with respect, and not to engage in bullying, harassment and unfair discrimination. In the future it may be that individuals will have a regulatory requirement to call out this behaviour in the workplace.

Have honest conversations with clients

Legal service may be a client service industry but that doesn't mean all client demands should be met at the expense of the wellbeing of the lawyers. We suggest setting clear boundaries from the outset on both sides—not just what does the client expect from you but what do you need from the client? Set timelines, deadlines, when each side will be unavailable from the start. For example, you could say that for the wellbeing of staff you won't reply to emails outside of core working times unless it's an emergency. It may be questioning if there is any flex in a particular deadline to save people working over a weekend. Of course, it may not always be possible to rigidly stick to these boundaries but even just having the conversation can start a more open dialogue. A recognition that both sides are human benefits both the client and the law firm.

Invest in training managers

If we could encourage firms and workplaces to do one thing, it would be to work towards providing management training to all supervisors and managers, and free up some of their time so they can regularly catch up with their team members to check in on how they are doing. Our Life in the Law research found that, of a range of wellbeing measures, regular catchups with a manager made the biggest difference to the wellbeing of employees yet only 48% of those in a position of management or supervisory capacity had received leadership, management, or supervisory training. Law is so focused on making every minute count, it leaves little time for anything else. We need to recognise that in order to properly offer supervision and support there needs to be some time set aside in the working day or week where people can talk and build relationships.

NLJ

Anyone working in the law including support staff can contact LawCare for free, confidential, emotional support. Online chat is available at www.lawcare.org.uk. You can also call 0800 279 6888 or email support@lawcare.org.uk.

Elizabeth Rimmer, chief executive, LawCare.