

'Wellbeing challenges in the public sector: from heroic sacrifice to mindless suffering - a reading, discussion and application group' 3 February 2021, 6.30 – 8.30 pm. Karen Olver & Kristina Karlsson.

The origin of the event

The idea behind the session started late last year when GRA member Karen Olver was speaking with Fred Wright about how system psychodynamics can be applied to workplace wellbeing, during a public health crisis like COVID-19. From this discussion the idea of a discussion group grew and developed. One of the key issues driving this was the question 'does the end ever justify the means when we think about public sector workforce wellbeing and the effort and expectations expected of them in responding to crisis?' Fred encouraged Karen to develop a proposal for the GRA board to consider, and supported this process providing helpful guidance and feedback along the way.

Key to the successful promotion of the work was a thought-provoking title. In addition, three conceptual questions served to frame the discussion: 'How do the tensions and pressures to deliver a crisis driven public health response find expression in the workplace? How does this impact wellbeing?'; and 'How can organisations constructively respond to the psychological impact on employee wellbeing during (and following) crises?' The event was advertised in the GRA newsletter as well as the LinkedIn and Facebook accounts. It was further promoted through Karen and Kristina's professional networks.

The event

Prior to the session the participants were provided with some pre-reading and a link to a podcast on burnout. A total of nine people (three GRA members and 6 non members) came together (virtually) on 3 February 2021 from 6.30 – 8.30 pm. The group came from a wide range of professional backgrounds and disciplines, and their interest in the event indicated that they also felt the issue of wellbeing was being overlooked. People were invited to share their associations and reflections from the reading and podcast. The group split into small groups to consider the conceptual questions, then came back together for a final facilitated plenary discussion.

The insights

The insights from the discussions included:

- Participants appreciated the space to talk, think together and contribute ideas. This insight mirrored the observation that leadership during the crisis has been too reactive and too stressed to 'think'.
- There are wide ranging views and understandings of workplace wellbeing.
- How crises can create conditions for mindless (that is, unreflective) leadership and for the heroic leadership archetype to thrive. One hypothesis developed was that these may be a defence against the thinking about employee wellbeing as something impossible to solve and therefore 'it cannot be thought about'. This led to a discussion about what types of leadership are needed during crises where trauma and its effects are apparent. How can our society remember the historical lessons about the impact and cost of trauma on its citizens and act accordingly?
- The group further observed that it appears to be very difficult for leadership teams to have discussions about the impact of the environment on their own wellbeing. Perhaps this speaks to their need to be heroic. There was also a frustration about practical ways to bring this discussion into the workplace in terms of raising the issue of wellbeing. Some questions included how can leaders under great stress be supported to think? And while the group did not come up with the answer, there was some reflection about whether there is 'no complete fix' to problems of this complexity. Other learnings were that we need to resist the temptation of simple solutions, and that small changes and experiments from wherever we are in the system will likely influence the broader system in some way.

Karen, Kristina and Fred are continuing to meet to further this thinking with a mind to shaping further interventions. Please reach out to Karen if you would like to be a part of it.