



Studio Prineas: Eva-Marie Prineas seated centre, in grey jacket. Photo: Felix Forest

## Managing mental health and well-being

WHILE NURTURING EMPLOYEES' MENTAL HEALTH HAS BEEN A GROWING TREND OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS, THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC HAS HEIGHTENED THIS FOR MANY BUSINESSES. AR SPEAKS TO TWO PRACTICES, ONE LARGE AND ONE BOUTIQUE, ABOUT THE WAY THEY CARE FOR THEIR STAFF'S MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING.

### Eva-Marie Prineas, principal, Studio Prineas

**AR: Studio Prineas is now 18 years old. How many were with the practice when it started and how many are there currently?**

In 2004, I ventured out on my own and created Studio Prineas. At the time, it was just me and a student who was assisting me for two days each week. Eventually, we grew to have four full-time staff and now I am lucky enough to work with a talented team of six.

**You've talked about giving employees time and the space to chat. How does this work in practice? Do you have scheduled meetings one-on-one with your staff?**

I believe that the most important thing a business leader can do is give staff their time. In my early career, there were times I would be so stressed that I wouldn't want to talk to anyone, but I soon realised that wasn't sustainable nor conducive to a healthy work/lifestyle. Now, I do my best to consciously create time in simple ways – for example, taking an extra team member to site so we can chat during the car ride or going for a walk together at lunchtime to grab a coffee. Because we have so many incidental and informal catch-ups, the need for formal check-ins has become less necessary.

**You've also revealed a search for a business-related counsellor/psychologist. Have there been any developments with this and why do you think it's important for the business?**

I made initial enquiries about getting an external consultant on board who is paid a retainer per year – a psychologist/counsellor who the team can talk to confidentially as required. However, at our scale with just six full-time staff, it has proven more effective and suitable for our office to do this on a case-by-case basis. I believe it's incredibly important to offer professional support for issues that I wouldn't be equipped to manage personally, and this service is one that can play a vital role for the personal well-being of my team. Separately, what we do find incredibly rewarding for our studio are the regular team building events; we may organise an evening at the Sydney Opera House to see a performance together, embark on a guided bushwalk to connect with Country or even train together for a team Fun Run.

**How does becoming registered or having the practice join an organisation like EmAGN (Emerging Architects and Graduate Network at the Australian Institute of Architects) help with both staff well-being and the business's operations?**

I have always seen the value in being connected with the A&D industry because I feel that involvement of all members above just the day-to-day is what really strengthens our profession. I encourage my team to take and make similar opportunities that broaden their experience and foster their own sense of connectedness within the wider architectural community – the registration process is a part of this.

The more graduates that are registered, the stronger our profession becomes, and the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) required under Architects' Registration is a wonderful opportunity to learn about aspects of our work that we would all benefit from having a deeper understanding of.

**Can you talk about layout and office design and the way this can impact positively or negatively on staff?**

Our office space is designed around clarity, collaboration and wellness. From the outset of the design, we sought to create an open, atelier-style layout to support the collaborative nature of our team and instil a sense of 'illumination' in the interior.

Purposefully elevated from the work floor, a generous kitchen, meeting and breakout zone creates opportunities for the team to congregate, collaborate and dwell. The idea of a raised platform was a core concept that I had thought about for a long time, as it delineates our communal spaces while still making them feel part of the whole.

Ultimately, my goal is for our team to feel happy coming to work, to feel like they're occupying a beautiful and safe place where all ideas are heard, and staff feel nurtured.

**Have you noticed a difference in the awareness and importance given to mental health over time and, if so, in what ways?**

During my years as an architecture student, I recall it being somewhat of an endurance sport with the 'all-nighter' as not only an expectation, but a sort of badge of honour. At the time, this mentality was also apparent in the workplace; however, there has thankfully been quite a shift since then, with practice

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culture and work/life balance now being acknowledged as incredibly important. To bring joy to the people who use our buildings, the work also needs to come from a place of joy.

**Has this evolution been influenced by the pandemic and the effect this had on the workforce over the last couple of years?**

I think the pandemic certainly has brought issues around mental health in the workplace into sharper focus. Having spent so much time at home over the past years, we have had an opportunity to reflect on how much we appreciate our studio environment – not just the space, but also the atmosphere that is created by the team. We really missed the incidental conversations and interactions that occur when we are physically together and have a newfound appreciation for those collaborative moments now.

**What are the business implications of not taking care of staff mental health and well-being?**

As the principal of our studio, I have a responsibility to lead by example. That means being committed to maintaining balance, so that I can be creative, productive and communicative with my team. The business implications of this balance being 'off', could likely result in lack of productivity, high staff turnover and a lower quality of work where communication is lacking.

**With those who have come back into the shared workspace after working remotely, have you noticed differences in how people interact or conduct themselves?**

I feel very lucky that all of our current team prefer to work from the studio. We love being together and it suits the collaborative nature of the team.







Michael Wright

#### What measures can practices take to mitigate any difficulties that may be experienced in this area?

The cultural environment of an office space is the most important aspect when it comes to mitigating any difficulties around how people feel at work. For example, I recall a friend of mine who was working as a lawyer for a large firm – she didn't mind the extremely long hours and challenging workload, but resigned nevertheless because she wanted to work with people who would greet one another with a 'good morning' at the start of the day. I think it can be so easy to discount the little things, but it's really these small but very human moments that can make the greatest difference.

#### Do you have animals/pets in the workspace or have any thoughts on their presence as a mental health tool?

We have George! He's a Yorkshire terrier who makes cameo appearances now and then – much to everyone's delight. There's definitely an elevated playful and happy energy in the studio when George is about.

#### What's the best piece of advice you could give to practice leaders looking to ensure their staff are travelling well emotionally and mentally?

In order to know if your team are travelling well mentally and emotionally, you need to invest the time in getting to know each individual. Even short interactions can be meaningful and ultimately make a big impact. On a larger scale, and more formally, we hold annual performance reviews, which focus on professional goals, and we actively follow up and provide opportunities for our team to develop in the areas where their passions lie.

### Michael Wright, head of people and culture, Hames Sharley

#### How long has Hames Sharley been going? How many were with the practice when it started and how many now?

Hames Sharley has been around for about 46 years so there's been a lot of change and a lot of growth in that time. We are, however, really fortunate to have several staff who have been here for over 20 years, including the founder, Bill Hames, who is still working with us today. We now have over 200 staff members on our team.

#### Have you noticed a difference in the awareness and importance given to mental health over that time and if so in what ways?

It's a topic that's gained a lot more awareness over time, particularly the past few years. I think there's been a tremendous shift in the way mental health is being discussed, not just in the workplace but across the community as well. Most of us now understand the importance that mental health has with regards to impacting our daily lives. Broadly speaking, mental health can still be taboo in some situations and there's still stigma attached to mental health in parts of the community, so Hames Sharley is really keen to get at the forefront of the awareness and importance placed on it. Overall, the progress has been fantastic.

#### Recently, the practice has become well-known for its progressive approach to well-being and mental healthcare awareness – was this awareness heightened by the pandemic and the effect this had on the workforce over the last couple of years?

The pandemic really highlighted the importance of support networks due to lockdowns etc driving a sense of isolation in many people. We recognised that, with a geographically diverse team across six states and territories, it was more important than ever to provide a sense of connection. So, yes, some of our focus on mental health was driven by the pandemic, but in a targeted sense. Mental health and well-being were already a focus in the lead-up to the pandemic, but I think it made us revisit our priorities within that topic (like it did with pretty much everything else at the time).

#### In February the practice announced even more progressive workplace policies, including targets for female representation and updates to parental leave, plus paid leave for things like menstruation and menopause, which have not traditionally been considered reasons for leave. How and why did the practice decide on including them?

We approached it from the philosophy that 'life events' of any nature shouldn't be viewed by the workplace as challenges to be overcome, but rather natural bumps and turns in our



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working journey that need to be navigated together. Once we broke down any notions of an antagonistic view of workplace relations, we were able to use empathy and diversity as the driving forces behind our policies. We realised that people don't want or need 17 different types of leave for different circumstances, they just need to know that, whatever life throws at them, their employer will be there to support them. We hope our leave policies reflect that intention.

**Has there been any internal or external pushback on such measures?**

Not that we're aware of.

**And have there been any concerns that this level of care for employee well-being could either be abused by staff or have other negative impacts on the business?**

Hames Sharley values trust and so we know that by exemplifying that trust with our people that we will achieve great outcomes together. As a consequence, our primary concern was rolling something out that would be perceived as unfair or not fully thought through. So, we spent a lot of time focusing on the use of language and procedures that made sure we accounted for as many perspectives as possible. However, we worked hard to ensure we didn't fall into the cynicism trap where we started looking for weak spots or areas that could be exploited.

**Can you talk about layout and office design and the way this can impact positively or negatively on staff well-being?**

This is an area our Workplace team have spent a lot of time understanding. They've taken research-driven, evidence-based design approaches to our new studio fitouts, which are having a noticeable effect on our workplace environment. Hames Sharley's approach to design is about getting context, listening and learning, and providing transformational solutions that are in parallel to the needs of the community. Given staff well-being is such a critical component of the modern workplace, our designs take all of this into account while also looking to anticipate and address the needs of a future workplace.

**With those who have come back into the shared workspace after working remotely, have you noticed differences in how people interact or conduct themselves? Or their comfort levels?**

We pride ourselves on our flexibility and so managing the return to a shared workspace hasn't been overwhelming. The main difference is the pandemic opened up the idea of working from home to be a lot more tangible and accessible for a lot of people, so the key difference of 'the return' is that it's not a full return, with some opting to spend some days not in the office,

"PEOPLE DON'T WANT OR NEED 17 DIFFERENT TYPES OF LEAVE FOR DIFFERENT CIRCUMSTANCES, THEY JUST NEED TO KNOW THAT, WHATEVER LIFE THROWS AT THEM, THEIR EMPLOYER WILL BE THERE TO SUPPORT THEM." – MICHAEL WRIGHT, HAMES SHARLEY

which has actually helped us to more fully embrace the fact we're a national practice with 200-plus staff across the country. Where they sit and when becomes secondary to who can do what. For businesses that obsess over the movements and activities of their staff, versus their values and outcomes, I can see why the comfort levels of their returning staff would reduce.

**What measures can practices take to mitigate any difficulties that may be experienced in this area?**

Focus on the leadership shadow.

**Do you have animals/pets in the workspace or have any thoughts on their presence as a mental health tool?**

This is an interesting one. I'm a dog lover and fully agree that for a large number of people pets can be a fantastic mood booster. However, this needs to be evaluated next to three key considerations regarding pets (and dogs in particular): phobias, hygiene and religious considerations. Improving the well-being of some staff shouldn't come at a loss of psychological safety for others.

**Without naming names, can you pinpoint any personal experiences in your practice where a member of staff was struggling with their mental health or a specific issue? And how were you able to deal with this?**

I have tried not to make much of a secret of my ongoing management of my own mental health. Sharing this journey internally allows those conversations to happen more freely. Consequently, I've been able to refer several people to our Employee Assistance Program for free counselling. We also continue to focus on flexibility, strong communication and role clarity to keep the controllable variables under our influence.

**What's the best piece of advice you could give to practice leaders looking to ensure their staff are travelling well emotionally and mentally?**

Check in, don't take anything for granted, and the best time to speak to a staff member that you're worried about is when you first notice [an issue]. The second best time is right now. **ar**

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