

Bolstering resilience in Customs: the wellbeing of our people

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Imagine a brand-new rubber band that springs back when you stretch it out. A strong rubber band will yield when being pulled and bounce back to its original shape when let go. This is resilience. Now imagine what happens when the rubber band has degenerated and stretched beyond its capabilities. It eventually breaks when it can no longer withstand the pressure.

Abstract

Bolstering resilience should apply equally to our organisational systems and our people. Our people are the greatest asset of our customs administrations, and the wellbeing of our workforce directly impacts the effective performance of our administrations. While positive steps have been taken to strengthen organisational resilience within customs administrations, this paper contends the resilience of our people, and the subject of mental health, is not sufficiently addressed in our administrations. This paper recommends customs administrations place equal importance on the mental and physical health of their employees by putting frameworks and guidelines in place and that these are backed by practical actions to build resilience in the customs workforce. Every customs officer can take action to change the resilience culture in our customs administrations by initiating the conversation on mental health and eradicating the stigma. As our customs administrations face a complex and rapidly changing future, it is critical that we not only build organisational resilience, but that we also focus on the resilience of our people.

Keywords: Customs, resilience, mental health, workforce, culture, wellbeing

1. Introduction

At the beginning of 2021, the World Customs Organization (WCO) launched its annual theme by inviting the global customs community to focus on ‘bolstering recovery, renewal and resilience for a sustainable supply chain’ (WCO, 2021). While Customs recovers from the global pandemic, the WCO is encouraging customs administrations to focus on putting people at the centre of the transformation process. In the past year, positive steps have been taken to bolster organisational resilience within customs administrations particularly in response to supply chain uncertainty. Now, as 2022 dawns, it is time to turn our attention to the resilience of our people.

Our people are the greatest asset of our customs administrations. The mental health and strength of our people directly influences our ability to effectively manage customs operations and impacts our core business. It is therefore vital that we have positive dialogue about mental health in our agencies. However, this paper argues that at a strategic level, this has not been a focal point of our customs administrations; in fact, mental health has been treated as a taboo topic and neglected.

2. What does our customs work environment look like?

As Mikuriya (2021, p. 8) said, ‘This year was particularly challenging for Customs and all international trade stakeholders, who had to adapt their daily operations and lives to accommodate these exceptional circumstances and the new normal working environment.’

Facilitating the movement of international goods across our borders is a tough job. The customs work environment involves heavy workloads, long working hours, high-pressure targets, tight deadlines, lack of resources, performance pressures, complexity in procedures, job insecurities, exposure to dangerous cargo and leadership issues (Container Control Programme – Women’s Professional Development Programme [CCP – WPDP], 2021). Uncertainty in the customs landscape was further exacerbated in 2020 and 2021. ‘The risks associated with this pandemic have required Customs authorities to implement safe and streamlined procedures, make effective use of new technologies, and engage in enormous coordination efforts with other government authorities and the private sector’ (Corcuera-Santamaria and Sanjines, 2020, para. 3). The COVID-19 pandemic has irrevocably changed the way Customs conducts business with our stakeholders. Customs administrations can no longer rely on routine methods of border security, revenue collection and trade facilitation. New and constantly changing health requirements and laws have only added to the existing pressures of the customs working environment. As the world looks to international trade to boost our economies, there is even greater pressure on our customs administrations to manage the extra health requirements, quarantine measures and border security required to control COVID-19. Constant change is the status quo in Customs today.

3. What is resilience?

Resilience is the ability to withstand, recover and/or grow in the face of stressors and changing demands. The science of resilience tells us that resilient individuals have stronger performance and better health (US Border and Customs, 2020). Resilient leaders are those who demonstrate the ability to see failures as minor setbacks, with the tenacity to bounce back quickly (Centre for Creative Leadership, 2020). Resilience can protect an individual from mental health conditions including stress, depression, anxiety and can also translate into higher productivity and performance. As our customs administrations face a complex and rapidly changing future, it is critical that we not only build organisational resilience, but that we also focus on the resilience of our people.

4. How do our customs administrations deal with mental health?

However, despite the importance of mental health and resilience, we don’t often talk about these subjects in our customs workplaces. During the 2021 Container Control Programme – Women’s Professional Development Programme (CCP – WPDP) conducted by the Australian Border Force and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) – WCO CCP Women’s Network, 84 per cent of participants (56 emerging women customs leaders from Asia, the Pacific and Australia) reported that mental health is not sufficiently addressed in their customs administrations (CCP – WPDP, 2021). Participants disclosed that:

- ‘Mental health is hush-hush in our agency.’
- ‘We will lose our job if we disclose our situation.’
- ‘I have to admit that I work in an environment where the awareness of mental health is poor.’
- ‘We can talk about physical health but not mental health.’

While the physical health of our customs workforce frequently comes under the spotlight with expectations for officers to maintain certain standards of physical fitness, in many cases there is a culture of silence around mental health. Physical health and safety are the subjects of multiple work policies and frameworks, while very little attention has been placed on the mental wellbeing of our workforce. The CCP – WPDP was the first career occasion for many emerging customs leaders to participate in a discussion about mental health.

4.1. Why has mental health been a taboo topic?

Mental health has been a taboo topic in many customs administrations. Respondents from the CCP – WPDP suggested that customs officers are not comfortable talking about mental health for multiple reasons, including a reluctance to share their burden, discomfort in sharing personal matters, workplace stigma attached to mental health issues, fear of negative impacts on career opportunities, possibility of redundancy or dismissal, lack of trust in co-workers and superiors, limited awareness on mental health, and absence of policies or support mechanisms related to mental health in our workplaces (CCP – WPDP, 2021).

5. Why do we need to bolster resilience for our people?

It is time to lift the silence around mental health. The wellbeing of our customs workforce and the effective performance of our customs administrations are inherently connected. Talking about mental health helps break the stigma surrounding mental illness. Depression and anxiety cost the global economy approximately US\$ one trillion annually due to lost productivity (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.). Poor mental health not only affects customs officers, but also impacts customs administrations through absenteeism, lower productivity, disability, accidents, and the inappropriate use of medical services (Harnois and Gabriel, 2000, p. 56). In contrast to this, building a resilient workforce creates an environment where officers focus with clarity, operate as critical thinkers and approach tasks with results-orientated innovation. It is now more crucial than ever that customs administrations ensure their officers are resilient to adapt and overcome the current unprecedented challenges. Prioritising mental wellbeing contributes not only to the professional and personal development of customs officers, it also positively impacts the overall performance of the organisation.

6. How do we change the culture and bolster resilience for our people?

The broader leadership and the organisational culture are likely to impact an employee's resilience at work (Crane, 2017). Customs leaders have a responsibility 'to make wellness a priority and put resources in place to promote it' (US Customs and Border Protection, 2020). How can we do this? At the organisational level, it requires policies which openly and practically address the wellbeing of our people and create open channels for positive dialogue and responses. 94 per cent of the CCP – WPDP participants agreed that their agencies will benefit from a policy that governs mental health and wellness (CCP – WPDP, 2021). Policies need to be backed up by practical actions including mental health education, access to counselling services, anonymous reporting and most importantly, the willingness of progressive leaders to simply be present and compassionately listen to their officers. This will build trust and confidence and will encourage officers to speak up.

Mental health issues can impact officers at any level at any time. From the border frontline to the most senior levels of our customs administrations, no one is immune. In response, our agencies need to build a culture where 'it's ok not to be ok' (Edwards, 2021). At a personal level, we need to honestly consider our own mental health status and take better care of ourselves. Participants in the

CCP – WPDP acknowledged that:

- ‘As law enforcement officers in Customs we are taught to be tough. But why is mental health taboo? I believe that reminding each other about mental wellness can make a positive change.’
- ‘Mental health issues are not a weakness! It is something we need to work on and heal.’
- ‘It’s okay not to be okay. And it’s okay to ask for help. Mental health and wellbeing need to be discussed more.’
- ‘Start the change now, it starts with us.’

Customs personnel at all levels can start by focusing on change within ourselves. ‘We don’t need to be at the top of the ladder to influence change. Let’s seize opportunities for positive change’ (CCP – WPDP, 2021). Figure 1 highlights steps proposed by the CCP – WPDP members to bolster personal resilience.

Figure 1: Steps to bolster personal resilience for customs personnel



Source: Container Control Programme – Women’s Professional Development Program (2021)

7. It starts with us

The WCO advocates for ‘putting people at the centre of change for a resilient and sustainable supply chain’ (WCO, 2021). This requires all of us to take action to change the resilience culture in our customs administrations. Perhaps you believe you don’t have the necessary power or influence to affect change, but even the smallest of actions can be the catalyst for positive progress. We should not be afraid to begin the conversation on mental health. We should strive to eradicate the stigma surrounding the topic and practise being present and supportive in the workplace. Customs administrations must place equal importance on the mental and physical health of their employees and put frameworks and guidelines in place that build the resilience of our officers. Bolstering resilience should apply equally to our organisational systems and our people. Just one question remains. What steps can we all take to enhance the resilience of our people and ourselves? It starts with us, and it can start today.

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