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The Pastoral Business Partner: Why the Future of HR Requires More Than Compliance, Coaching and Mental Health First Aid

By Elissa Smith

There is a conversation happening in organisations that very few people are having publicly.

It is *not* a conversation about industrial relations.

It is *not* a conversation about AI.

It is *not* even a conversation about mental health.

It is a conversation about the growing number of people arriving at work carrying burdens that have little to do with work itself...such as:

- The manager navigating a marriage breakdown.
- The employee caring for an ageing parent.
- The high performer quietly struggling with anxiety.
- The leader sitting in executive meetings while battling loneliness and burnout.
- The juggling of commitments between work and home domains.

In today's workplaces, these stories are increasingly common. Yet while organisations are investing heavily in psychosocial safety, wellbeing programs and Mental Health First Aid, there remains an under-recognised capability that some HR professionals practise every day but rarely name: **Pastoral care**.

I believe it is time that changed.

Not because HR professionals should become counsellors and not because organisations need another wellbeing initiative.

But because the future of HR may depend on our ability to walk alongside people as human beings, not merely employees.

The Hidden Human Cost of Modern Work

Australian workplaces are experiencing unprecedented attention on psychosocial safety.



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Recent AHRI research highlights that psychosocial hazards such as excessive workloads, workplace conflict, poor leadership and role ambiguity are creating significant organisational and human costs. Stress-related absences alone are estimated to cost Australian businesses billions of dollars each year. AHRI also reports that claims and complaints associated with psychosocial hazards continue to rise across Australian organisations.

Safe Work Australia has similarly reported strong links between poor psychosocial safety climates, absenteeism, presenteeism and productivity losses, estimating the cost to employers in the billions annually.

These statistics matter.

But behind every psychological injury claim, every resignation, every burnout case and every absence sits something often overlooked: A human being experiencing distress.

And distress rarely arrives neatly packaged.

It emerges through grief, relationship breakdowns, financial pressure, caregiving responsibilities, loneliness, illness, uncertainty and loss.

In many cases, employees may ultimately benefit from professional support. However, the first thing they often need is a trusted human being who notices they are struggling and is willing to walk alongside them.

Mental Health First Aid Was Never Meant to Do Everything

One of the most positive developments of the past decade has been the growing adoption of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA).

Mental Health First Aid provides individuals with practical capabilities to recognise distress, support someone experiencing a mental health challenge and encourage professional assistance where needed. The evidence base supporting MHFA is substantial and the model has now been adopted globally.

However, Mental Health First Aid was never designed to provide ongoing support.



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Its purpose is intervention; stabilisation; recognition & referral.

In that sense, it is similar to physical first aid.

It is essential. But it is not the journey.

What happens after the referral?

Who checks in a week later?

Who provides space for the difficult conversation?

Who notices the subtle signs that someone is still struggling?

Who simply sits with another human being without immediately trying to fix them?

Increasingly, the answer is a HR professional, especially in organisations whose staff are remote either in distance or presence, or where there are managerial gaps in skill or presence.

The Capability We Have Forgotten to Name

In my experience leading HR teams and partnering with business leaders across multiple organisations, a surprising percentage of my work has fallen into a category that rarely appears in job descriptions.

Listening. Supporting. Encouraging. Checking in. Providing perspective.

Walking alongside someone through a difficult season of life.

In my last organisation, much of this work occurred supporting my direct reports as they navigated personal and professional challenges. Currently much of it occurs with distant leaders carrying the weight of operational pressure, workforce challenges and personal circumstances.

I estimate that between five and ten per cent of my role has involved this type of relational support. Yet nowhere in traditional HR competency frameworks is this work formally acknowledged.

The profession has language for *coaching*.

It has language for *employee relations*.

It has language for *engagement*.

But it has very little language for sustained human care.



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That is where *pastoral care* belongs.

The Evidence is Already There

Interestingly, while the term *pastoral care* is rarely used in mainstream HR literature, the underlying concepts are increasingly supported by organisational research.

Studies examining supervisor support consistently demonstrate positive impacts on employee wellbeing, job satisfaction and resilience. Research also shows that people who feel supported by leaders and organisations experience lower levels of stress and work-family conflict.

Research into workplace loneliness tells a similar story.

A systematic review and meta-analysis published in *Occupational Medicine* (2024) found workplace loneliness is associated with lower job satisfaction, poorer performance, higher burnout and weaker manager relationships. The authors concluded that workplace interventions aimed at increasing connection represent an important opportunity for organisations.

Meanwhile, workplace loneliness is increasingly being recognised as a global organisational challenge, with research suggesting large numbers of employees' experience loneliness regardless of whether they work remotely or in person.

When viewed collectively, these findings point towards a fundamental human truth:

- People perform better when they feel connected.
- People cope better when they feel supported.
- People thrive when they know someone genuinely cares.

Compassion is Becoming a Leadership Imperative

Perhaps the most compelling body of evidence comes from the growing field of compassionate leadership.

A systematic review of compassionate leadership identified recurring dimensions including empathy, openness, communication, wellbeing support, respect and dignity.



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Researchers examining compassionate cultures in organisations describe compassion as a four-stage process:

1. Noticing suffering.
2. Understanding suffering.
3. Empathising with suffering.
4. Taking action to help.

This framework could easily describe the best HR practitioners.

Not because they are therapists and not because they have all the answers.

But because they create conditions where difficult conversations can occur safely and respectfully.

At its best, HR has always been deeply relational work.

Compassionate leadership research simply provides the evidence base for what many experienced practitioners already know.

The Emergence of the Pastoral Business Partner

If psychosocial safety represents the compliance obligation, pastoral care represents the human response.

The emerging HR professional increasingly requires three complementary capabilities:

Mental Health First Aid - Recognise distress. Provide immediate support. Encourage professional assistance.

Psychosocial Risk Management - Identify organisational hazards. Manage risk. Meet legal obligations.

Pastoral Care - Build trust. Reduce isolation. Support resilience. Provide human connection during periods of difficulty and change.

The first two are becoming well established.

The third remains largely invisible. Yet it is often the capability employees remember most as people rarely recall the policy. They remember the person who sat beside them when life became difficult.



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Why This Matters for the Future of HR

The traditional HR profession was built around systems, processes and compliance.

Modern HR expanded into culture, leadership and organisational performance.

The next evolution may be something different. Something more human.

As workplaces become increasingly complex, technologically connected yet emotionally disconnected, organisations will need professionals who can bridge the gap between performance and humanity.

The future HR professional will still need industrial relations expertise.

They will still need strategic capability.

They will still need commercial acumen.

But increasingly they will also need the capacity to provide meaningful human support.

Not counselling.

Not therapy.

Not advice-giving.

Simply the profound and often underrated skill of walking alongside people.

This is the essence of pastoral care.

And perhaps it is time we finally recognised it as one of the most important capabilities in the HR toolkit. Because while organisations may invest in systems, technology and compliance frameworks, it is human connection that ultimately enables people to flourish.

And helping people flourish has always been the best part of HR.

References and Research

Key themes and evidence in this article draw upon research from the Australian HR Institute (AHRI), Safe Work Australia, Mental Health First Aid Australia, workplace social support research, workplace loneliness studies, and emerging literature on compassionate leadership and workplace chaplaincy.

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