national safe work month

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Safe work is for life
national safe work month 2026

Knowledge session: Creating sustainable workplaces through SMART work design

Wednesday 15 October 2026, 1.30pm – 2.30pm AEST





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Acknowledgement of Country

Acknowledgement of artist
Healing Hands – Cover artwork by Dion Devow of DDesigns



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Overview of today's session

- Why change can feel so hard
- What can go wrong during changes and common mistakes leaders make
- Using SMART strategies to buffer change
- Case activity: using SMART to buffer change
- Practical tips for using work design
- Q&A

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Your experience of change

What kind of change are you currently navigating in your workplace?

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Your experience of change

What gets harder first during change in your team?

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Why change can feel hard

What are some of the feelings you associate with change?

Why change can feel hard

Change feels hard when it:



Removes clarity — people don’t know what to expect



Feels unsafe — uncertainty can seem like a threat



Fuels worry — “what if?” thinking grows anxiety



Creates loss — even good change means letting go

What sometimes goes wrong

What goes wrong	Common manager response	Impact on worker
⬆ Uncertainty/ambiguity	Withold information until clear	⬆ Role ambiguity/fear
⬇ Agency/control	Tighten oversight	⬇ Reduced autonomy
⬆ Workload spikes	Push through	⬆ Overload/burnout
⬆ Support needs	Maintain status quo	⬇ Trust and wellbeing

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The SMART work design model



Using SMART to buffer change



= Stimulating (meaningful work)

Challenge: Change can make people question '*What's the point?*'

Response: Remind teams of the '*Why?*' – how their work matters.

Scenario: Your team is adopting a new process. Staff say the old way was better and ask: 'Why are we even doing this?' What is one sentence you can say to link the change back to a meaningful purpose?

Manager tactic: Connect the change to broader outcomes so staff see its value.

Using SMART to buffer change



= Mastery (competence and confidence)

Challenge: Change can reduce confidence (fear and perceived threat).

Response: Focus on small wins and development.

Scenario: A high performer is now unsure of their abilities with a new system – they're avoiding tasks and second-guessing their work. What is one thing you could do to help them get a quick win and feel more confident?

Manager tactic: Provide training, clear expectations, and practice opportunities.

Using SMART to buffer change



= Agency (sense of control and voice)

Challenge: Teams can feel powerless in change (disengagement or resistance).

Response: Involve and empower via bounded choices (invite input on how).

Scenario: Staff say the new policy is a ‘done deal’ by the executive and they feel they have no say, so their morale drops. What is one thing you could let them decide or influence about how the change is implemented?

Manager tactic: Identify areas where the team can influence the process – e.g., let them adapt workflows or suggest improvements during rollout.

Using SMART to buffer change



= Relational (social support and safety)

Challenge: Change can spark anxiety and withdrawal.

Response: Increase team support and trust.

Scenario:

You notice two team members have gone quiet since the changes were announced, and their engagement seems to be dropping. What is one thing you could do to build more support and safety in your team during change?

Manager tactic: Create a psychologically safe space; team and 1:1 check-ins.

Using SMART to buffer change

T = **Tolerable demands (manage load and pacing)**

Challenge: Increasing cognitive load and stress risks overload, fatigue and depletion.

Response: Balance workloads to ensure people have capacity to adapt.

Scenario: Your team is delivering BAU projects and now must also implement a new system – people look exhausted and are falling behind. How can you create more capacity?

Manager tactic: Re-prioritise, pause, stagger or simplify tasks; adjust timelines if possible, and watch for signs of excessive stress (e.g. long hours, mistakes).

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Case activity scenario

Your branch has undergone **multiple changes** in six months, including structural and procedural changes and there's another new initiative. Many staff say they're 'change-fatigued'. Morale is low; people are cynical about another new initiative, and some feel burned out.

Goal: Identify which reaction/s to change are at play and decide which SMART strategy to prioritise first.

Instructions: Let's discuss in two parts:

1. What's the main issue for this team?
2. Which SMART action should you take first, and why?

SMART strategies in different roles



People leaders

Are responsible for shaping day-to-day work experiences for their team members

Ask: How can I help my team experience this change as something they can influence, understand and succeed in?



Senior leaders / HR / WHS

Are responsible for influencing work design at a systems and organisational level

Ask: How can we design the change process so SMART work design is strengthened, rather than considered afterwards?



HSRs / workers

Don't control organisational decisions but often have the best insight into how work design is impacted

Ask: How can we help shape change, so it works better for the people doing the work?

Practical tips for using work design

- Focus on fixing the work, not the worker.
- Diagnose work design by asking questions like:
  - *Where do you feel work is becoming unclear, overloaded or disconnected?*
- Co-design solutions with affected staff using SMART as a discussion tool.
- Remember: small actions can have a big impact.
- Use SMART for almost any common management challenge.