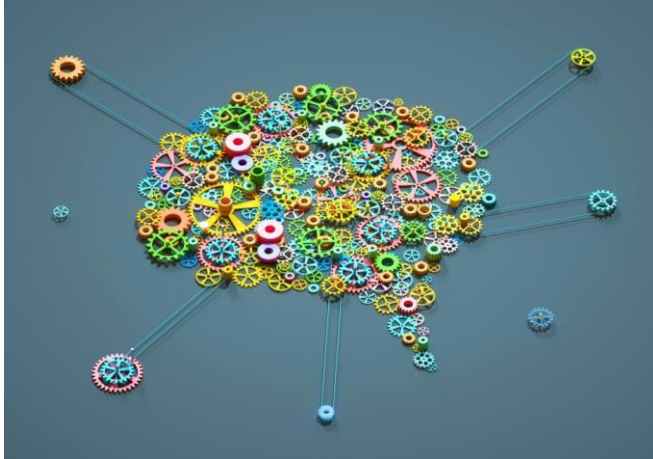




Better Mental Health in The Workplace Begins With Honesty And Leadership



The year 2023 is firmly in the rearview mirror, meaning business leaders have turned their eyes toward the road ahead, and while the new beginnings may seem exciting, the economic picture is still opaque and the global outlook is uncertain. Following a year shaped largely by waves of layoffs, concerns of a recession and increasing international turmoil, 2024 could prove to be just as difficult and unpredictable.

That atmosphere of chaos can easily translate to higher levels of anxiety, depression and distress—which are not only a drain on workers’ mental health and well-being but problems that companies must anticipate because they can have an outsized impact on their bottom lines.

Per a 2022 Gallup poll, workers with fair or poor mental health were "estimated to have nearly 12 days of unplanned absences annually compared with 2.5 days for all other workers." Generalized across the U.S. workforce, that missed work was estimated to cost the economy \$47.6 billion annually in lost productivity.

Meanwhile, prioritizing mental well-being has become increasingly important to working Americans. More than three-quarters of U.S. workers say they’re looking for workplaces that support mental health, according to the United States Surgeon General’s Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being.

But as with most components of a company’s culture, addressing employees’ mental health and well-being demands deliberate and bold leadership. To create lasting impacts and positive outcomes, managers will need to start at the top and lead by example. Whether or not you’re cognizant of it, your team is looking to you to model healthy behaviors and self-care.

Prioritizing mental health will look different depending on the individual, but there is plenty of low-hanging fruit to use as a starting point. One place to begin is with work-life balance and boundaries. Managers, how often do you work through the lunch hour instead of taking a break? Consider taking time away from your desk to eat, and don’t be afraid to invite your teammates to join you. When you leave the office, set clear “off hours”—times when you are not available to respond to work correspondence—and encourage your employees to do the same.

According to the American Psychological Association, only one-third of workers say "their employer offers a culture where breaks are encouraged," and only two-fifths say "their employer offers a culture where time off is respected." That’s why it’s critical for managers to model this behavior on a consistent basis. It reminds employees that it is acceptable for them to do the same.

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Setting a solid example of self-care builds trust and can foster an atmosphere of psychological safety where employees feel valued, respected and cared for. It also breaks down the barriers to vulnerability, which will be key in creating an environment of open, honest communication—something managers will also need to pay close attention to.

When it comes to maintaining good mental health, eliminating stigma is half the battle. Talking openly with your team is one way to help erase the feelings of shame that often accompany mental health difficulties. One-on-one check-ins are an excellent avenue for conversations about mental health and psychological well-being, and when appropriate, consider sharing your personal experiences. This proved to be beneficial for Microsoft, where individuals began sharing their own experiences with their mental health.

"We didn't ask, but it has happened that many of our leaders stepped up and started telling their stories, their personal struggles or ones they've witnessed," one senior director told Reuters. "And it has naturally become pervasive in the culture."

Practice empathy when someone shares something with you. It's important to keep in mind that employees will have different communication needs and styles, so try to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. This is especially important for neuro-divergent employees, meaning those who live with a mental illness or those who experience varying levels of social or learning aptitudes.

Workers may feel nervous about asking for assistance or opening up. Be patient, as it will take time to build this new routine of checking in—and most importantly, remind your teammates that they will not be ostracized, penalized or otherwise punished for taking care of their health.

As you make these conversations a staple of your leadership style, remind your team regularly about the resources available to them. Consider meeting with a human resources representative to gain a comprehensive understanding of helpful benefits like an employee assistance program, or EAP. Request additional training or workshops to expand your company's knowledge of and tools for mental health.

Although there is no perfect formula or easy recipe for improving employees' mental health, leading by example and opening lines of communication can help reduce the stigma that often prevents people from seeking help. Changing the way your workplace addresses mental health and well-being is a true win-win: You'll be making a positive impact in the lives of employees, and you'll help set up the company for better financial success.

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