



Workplace strategies for positive mental health

Increasing workloads, rapid technological change, shifting market demands and lack of work-life balance are taking a psychological toll on employees – and a financial toll on organizations. Mental health issues cost the Canadian economy more than \$16 billion a year and depression alone costs U.S. employers more than \$23 billion. However, those costs are much higher when hidden costs related to presenteeism (workers who are on the job but not functioning well because of physical or mental issues), replacement of resources and personnel, overtime and the effects on the morale of other team members are factored in.

Mental health issues are now a leading cause of short- and long-term disability in North America. In Canada, 78 percent of short-term disability claims and 67 percent of long-term claims are related to mental health. However, it's not only North American companies that are being affected. The World Health Organization has stated that by 2020, depression will be the leading cause of disability worldwide.

The impact of employee mental health on organizational success is clear. But what can organizations and managers do to support the psychological health of their people and the economic health of their business?

Supporting mental health

One North American study found that 80 percent of workers experience stress on the job and 30 percent feel extreme stress. More disturbing is the fact that 26 percent feel they are often burned out. For businesses, employee stress and burnout not only result in increased absenteeism and disability leaves, but also increased errors, accidents, interpersonal conflicts, and benefit costs as well as decreased productivity, innovation and customer service.

What exactly is causing this stress? According to one U.S. study, 46 percent of respondents cited workload, 29 percent blamed interpersonal issues, 20 percent said juggling work and personal responsibilities were the cause of their stress and six percent worried about job security. Approximately half said they needed help managing their stress and 42 percent felt their coworkers needed help.

As a result, more and more organizations are focusing on creating workplaces that support the psychological health of employees.

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Psychologically healthy workplaces

A psychologically healthy workplace has many components, including:

- Fosters trust in managers, supervisors and senior management Provides employees at all levels with a clear understanding of the organization's vision and strategy
- Clearly defines employees' duties and responsibilities
- Allows people to voice their opinions on subjects that concern them
- Recognizes good work and service
- Finds ways to have fun as a team
- Manages workloads
- Promotes work-life balance
- Encourages respectful behaviours
- Has conflict resolution practices in place
- Provides professional training and learning opportunities
- Has workplace programs in place to help reduce the stigma of mental health issues
- Provides resources, such as an Employee and Family Assistance Program, for those seeking help

How many of these does your workplace have in place?

Supporting employees

There is no blueprint for creating a psychologically healthy workplace because every workplace is different. The first step for any organization or manager is to understand their employees – the demographics, job demands, and professional and personal stresses – and then find unique and innovative ways to support them. One company that has long led the way in creating a psychologically healthy workplace is Microsoft. Aside from offering flexible hours, great health benefits (including free physician house calls!), excellent parental leaves, free gym memberships, a volunteer and gift-matching program. Also their head office in the Seattle area provides a free shuttle service (with WiFi) to transport people to and from work, environmentally sustainable on-site cafes and kitchens as well as a spa, soccer field, bank, dry-cleaning service, salon, retail shops, and 11 restaurants.

Most organizations don't have the resources or space to provide such extensive services but even small initiatives such as flexible hours or telework can demonstrate an organization's concern for the well-being of its people. At Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C., employees have access to a nap room to help them rest or relax during a busy or stressful day.

While workplace programs are important, managers who know what to do when employees are in distress are the real key to any successful workplace mental health strategy.

Forty-four percent of managers have had no training on how to manage employees with mental health issues. Managers want and need, more workplace training in order to bridge this gap.

This training should include:

- Identifying conflicts and distress in the workplace

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- Conflict resolution skills
- Recognizing what behaviours contribute to a toxic environment
- Encouraging appropriate and respectful workplace conduct (no raised voices, ridiculing others, bullying or intimidation)
- Understanding where to direct employees for further support and information

Employee health is organizational health

Both organizations and their managers need to remain adaptable and flexible in maintaining a psychologically healthy workplace. North America has a multi-generational and culturally diverse workforce and a one-size-fits-all approach to organizational health and productivity no longer works. Programs must be continually assessed and adjusted to meet changing demographics and needs.

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Multitasking managers: Setting the right example

Being a manager is a demanding job. Meeting organizational goals and resolving unexpected problems while juggling the demands of senior leaders and the needs of the team can mean bouncing from one activity to another and feeling like having achieved very little. Being an effective manager means working smarter – and inspiring your entire team to work smarter.

Setting the example

There are several techniques that may help you better manage your time. Try the following:

- **Apply the 80/20 principle.** The 80/20 principle states that approximately 80 percent of our results come from just 20 percent of our efforts. The key to better utilizing our time – and increasing our effectiveness – is to focus more on the 20 percent of our work that actually produce results. These are likely to be complex, demanding, time-consuming tasks, but they are what should be at the top of our daily to-do list.
- **Schedule meetings in blocks.** Meetings are usually interspersed throughout your day and invariably go over schedule – making it difficult for you to focus on that important 20 percent. If you are calling the meetings, schedule them in blocks so that one begins right after another. This also helps meetings to start and end on time.
- **Schedule specific times to return calls and emails each day.** Use your voicemail to say you will return calls at a certain time or by the end of the business day. This way you won't be constantly interrupted.
- **Schedule quiet time.** You need time to focus on those priority tasks that, as stated, are often complex and challenging. At the same time, you want to have an open door policy for your staff. Let your team know that when your door is closed, you're working on something that requires your full concentration and would appreciate not being interrupted, unless the matter is urgent. Also let people know that when your door is open, they are welcome to bring questions and concerns to you.
- **Delegate.** You'll have more time to concentrate on pressing matters if you delegate certain tasks. You'll also demonstrate that you value people's abilities and are ready to help them develop their skills.

Leading – not just managing

Great leaders are not only knowledgeable and capable – they're perceived as being fair and trustworthy. They set the standard for others to follow.

- **Be accountable.** Admit when you're wrong and be gracious when proved wrong. Also understand when other people make mistakes. Managers who are more concerned with what is right rather than being right are less likely to have team members who shift blame and hide their errors.
- **Take time to communicate clearly.** You don't want your staff repeatedly asking for clarification or spending hours trying to figure out what you want. Spend a little extra time upfront conveying information and listening to any questions or concerns.
- **Involve staff.** Ask your team for ideas to streamline processes, improve resources and reduce workloads (attending lengthy meetings that do not involve your department). You'll get a better understanding of the challenges staff face while empowering them.

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- Resolve conflicts quickly and effectively. Conflicts, disagreements and misunderstandings waste time and undermine productivity.

There are many talents, abilities and personality traits that make a great team leader but superior time management skills are perhaps one of the most important. A manager who is able to manage his or her own time – and the time of their teams – gets things done without placing unnecessary pressure on others. That means a more productive, engaged and happier team.

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