A Call To Employers: Make Mental Health Your Business

[Ghostwritten by Elizabeth Ellis for TCS Education System]

Michael HorowitzForbes Councils Member
Forbes Nonprofit CouncilCOUNCIL POST| Membership (Fee-Based)
Dec 29, 2021,07:00am EST

President and founder of TCS Education System.

We need look no further than the headlines — and our own communities — to recognize that mental illness is on the rise. A recent study (registration required) from Mental Health America confirms that workplace stress is severely impacting employees' mental health. Further, the study highlights an important opportunity for leaders and employers to be part of the solution: 59% of employees surveyed report that their employers do not currently do enough to help them manage stress, and only a tiny minority — less than 5% — strongly agree that their employer creates a safe environment for those who live with mental illness.

Against this backdrop, consider that "about one in four adults suffers from a diagnosable mental health disorder in a given year." Regardless of sector or scale, virtually every organization is likely touched by this issue in some way. As leaders charged with shaping culture and developing healthy teams, how

can we do more to support our employees and, consequently, protect our organizations' stability during challenging times?

At my organization, TCS Education System, we're fortunate to have a strong institutional legacy of mental and behavioral health awareness and expertise. I am a trained psychologist with extensive clinical background, and a number of our affiliated universities specialize in preparing students for careers in mental health. Of course, we are not immune to the impact of broader societal mental illness trends; no organization could be. But certain core beliefs and practical standards have served us well in recent tumultuous times, and they may be of value to others.

1. Make mental health your business.

There is no one-size-fits-all formula for providing appropriate employee mental health resources. But an important first step for every organization is simply prioritizing the topic. At my organization, this means ensuring our employee health plans include high-quality mental health benefits and partnering with additional providers for an array of support services designed to help team members combat the many stresses of balancing work and life. We also recently rolled out a mental health training program to equip our managers to recognize and help employees in need and brought in a mental health speaker for one of our town hall meetings.

For smaller-scale organizations without the ability to provide expansive benefit packages, simply making a point of researching and publicizing available mental health resources from your local community can send an important message of care and commitment — and potentially make a big difference for a team member who is struggling. Often such organizations provide speakers or training at low or no cost to interested groups.

2. Normalize the topic to combat stigma.

Even as mental illness dominates the public consciousness, stigma remains a powerful force — and poses a serious barrier to employees accessing available resources. One of the strongest actions a leader can take is intentionally creating space for mental health awareness in public and in one-on-one conversations. Even well-intentioned leaders may hesitate to broach the topic because they lack training or expertise, or simply because it feels too personal. But these dynamics only perpetuate a harmful culture of shame. Regularly delivering matter-of-fact reminders of available mental health resources — whether within your organization or in your community — is key to raising awareness, reducing stigma and creating a healthy environment.

3. Balance care and accountability.

Ultimately, the workplace only functions when we work. In an era of rising mental illness and rampant stress, leaders and managers face the truly difficult task of balancing support and compassion with the functional demands of effective operations. When there's much work to be done and limited resources to do it, eliminating all stressors cannot be the goal.

It's helpful to think about this balance in terms of sustainability. A healthy workplace is one that supports employees with the resources and flexibility to manage mental health while consistently fulfilling job responsibilities over the long term. Compassionate accommodation that temporarily relieves employees in times of crisis is not only kind, but essential to overall organizational health. But if crisis conditions become the norm rather than the exception, it falls to leaders to recalibrate expectations with candor and respect.

Throughout my career, I've cherished as heroes those leaders who are most highly attuned to the well-being of their teams — "attuned" being the operative word. We cannot pretend to fully address a topic as complex as mental health in the workplace with policies and regulations (although both of these things

are also important). Rather, as leaders, I believe we must invoke our human strengths of perceptiveness, empathy, integrity and trust to meaningfully combat stigma and create environments conducive to mental health. I think often of one of my most influential mentors: a man of unflappable calm and abundant generosity. He understood that the best leaders don't aspire to eliminate problems, but rather to create conditions that empower employees to solve them. His go-to phrase is a valuable touchstone for all of us in these troubled times: "How can I help?"