ELEVATING LEADERSHIP:

The Importance of Mental Health Training in the Workplace

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In the ever-evolving landscape of leadership development, programs often focus on honing skills like emotional intelligence and navigating difficult conversations. Yet one crucial competency remains overlooked—mental health training for leaders.

Prioritize your managers' skill sets to best support their employees' wellbeing

Imagine a scenario in which an employee has fallen to the floor in distress, visibly in pain and struggling to breathe. As a manager, your response would undoubtedly be swift, calling for assistance and providing first aid. But what if an employee, while seated at their desk, buries their head in their hands, quietly sobbing and in obvious emotional turmoil? In such cases, many managers find themselves uncertain about whether and how to extend help, underscoring a profound gap in leadership training.

One in three employees says their manager fails to recognize the impact they have on their team's mental wellbeing, and seven in 10 would like their company and manager to do more to support mental health.[1]

The time has come to address mental health in the workplace, take meaningful action, and implement the right initiatives—and it must start at the top.

> Training leaders in mental health awareness leads to a healthier work environment, but also improved overall team dynamics, conflict resolution, and employee retention.

The unseen challenge of supporting workplace mental health

Globally, an estimated 12 billion working days are lost annually to depression and anxiety.[2] Astonishingly, traditional leadership training rarely addresses how to support employees facing emotional distress. Today's leaders must possess people skills that extend beyond technical expertise. Leadership is no longer about simply promoting the best performer, but about fostering a healthy work environment.

Performance enhancement

Cultivating a culture where employees feel at ease discussing their concerns, questions, and ideas is pivotal. Overlooked stressors, such as excessive workloads, can lead to burnout and decreased productivity.

Managers, as the front line of employee oversight, are ideally positioned to detect and address concerning challenges. Around 91% of managers agree that their actions affect their staff's wellbeing, yet a mere 24% of managers have received any kind of training in mental health.[3]

An array of research consistently shows that leaders who are trained in mental health awareness are better equipped to identify signs of distress, extend support, and create a safe space for open dialogue. Consequently, this support not only leads to a healthier work environment, but also improved overall team dynamics, conflict resolution, and employee retention.

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Presence and employee wellbeing

The toll of absenteeism resulting from stress and other mental health-related issues is costing employers dearly, with estimates suggesting $1,685 per employee per year.[4] Furthermore, the cost of presenteeism—where employees are at work but not performing their best—is 10 times higher, averaging 57.5 days of suboptimal performance.[5]

To retain the younger workforce, organizations must adapt to their unique needs, which include a focus on overall health and work-life balance. Providing mental health training for leaders sends a powerful message to employees that their mental wellbeing is a top priority. When leaders are equipped with the tools to support their teams, it creates a supportive culture where employees feel valued, understood. and motivated.

Protecting and promoting mental health

Despite the growing prevalence of mental health concerns, stigma still surrounds the act of seeking help. The reality is 47% of Americans perceive therapy as a sign of weakness.[6] In the workplace, the issue is exacerbated, with just over half of workers saying they're at least somewhat comfortable discussing mental health openly with coworkers and supervisors, while only one in five are completely comfortable.[7]

According to a global study, 69% of employees said their managers impacted their mental health, which is greater than doctors (51%) or therapists (41%), and on par with the employee's spouse or partner (69%).[8]

The multifaceted managerial role

Managers juggle multiple roles, from interpreters and referees to mental health mediators and problem solvers. This dynamic position—often caught between balancing senior leadership's demands and staff needs—requires adaptability.

Managers should recognize the significance of their role and the responsibilities it entails. According to a global study, 69% of employees said their managers impacted their mental health, which is greater than doctors (51%) or therapists (41%), and on par with the employee's spouse or partner (69%).[8]

Therefore, implementing mental health training equips managers with tools to fulfill these diverse responsibilities effectively. These initiatives include establishing clear policies, resources, and support systems that promote mental wellbeing. HR leaders can collaborate with mental health professionals to develop customized training programs that address their organization's unique needs. It could be as simple as starting with the current state of your organization and measuring the impact of existing mental health programs or taking a strategic approach to understanding whether the programs are truly valued.

The landscape of leadership is evolving, and with it, the demands on leaders. Mental health training is no longer a nice-to-have, but an essential competency to drive the performance, presence, and protection of employees. It's time for organizations to adapt their leadership development programs to address this critical need, ultimately fostering a healthier and more productive work environment.

By investing in the mental wellbeing of leaders, organizations can unlock their full potential in an ever-changing world where technology and AI coexist with the enduring importance of human connections.

5 Steps to Take Action Today

As you approach the topic of mental health at your organization, remember that change starts from within. Comprehensive training is critical, and it takes time to develop, implement, and complete. If you are looking to take action today, there are steps you can take to create an open, supportive environment that can enhance your employees' emotional wellbeing.

1. **Be accessible.**
   Cultivate an environment of open communication by letting your employees know that you are readily available for discussions about their mental health. Forge this connection by telling them your door is always open and that you're always ready to listen.

2. **Prioritize confidentiality.**
   Assure your team that any conversations regarding mental health will be held in the strictest of confidence, fostering an environment of trust and safety.

3. **Initiate heartfelt check-ins.**
   Take the initiative to check in on your team members' mental wellbeing on a regular basis. Engage in one-on-one meetings that delve beyond the surface and do so with a caring heart.

4. **Nurture a culture of vulnerability.**
   Encourage authentic conversations about mental health among your people. Cultivate a culture where they feel comfortable sharing their experiences and looking out for each other, creating a community of support.

5. **Exemplify empathetic leadership.**
   Show compassion and empathy when employees approach you with their mental health concerns. Seek to understand their unique perspectives, and follow up with genuine care and support even after the conversation has ended.

By embracing these principles and executing these steps, you'll not only support your team's mental health but also foster a profound and lasting connection, thus strengthening your role as a compassionate and impactful manager.

Sources

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