Why workplace culture matters for mental health

Link Financial's Hannah Riley explains why a supportive and understanding workplace culture can help drive productivity and success, as World Mental Health Day approaches.

In the past, mental health in the workplace was often considered a taboo subject but, as its symptoms and impact have become better understood, employers are demonstrating a real desire to support their workforces.

More and more companies are realising that a strong workplace culture can be critical to business success. A supportive workplace plays a key role in addressing mental health issues and is crucial in attracting and retaining talent, as well as contributing to productivity.

Governments have come to realise that the consequences of poor mental health can have a severe economic impact, so it is becoming a key policy area. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 12 billion workdays are lost annually due to depression and anxiety, costing the global economy nearly $1trn.[1]

Given all of the above, businesses would be well advised to look out for signs of an unhealthy workplace culture.

Impact on mental health

Given the amount of time employees spend at work, it is little surprise that the work environment can greatly impact mental health. The vast majority (84%) of US employees say that at least one workplace factor has had a negative impact on their mental health, according to Mind Share Partners.[2]

The not-for-profit identified the top three workplace factors impacting mental health: emotionally draining work, challenges with work-life balance and lack of recognition.[3]

However, there is a wide variety of ways in which a negative workplace can impact an employee's mental health.

They may be concerned about being able to fulfil their duties and feel there is not enough support. Perhaps there are poor management practices, including a lack of communication. Understaffing may be an issue, with excessive workloads resulting long, unsocial hours. They may be experiencing harassment or bullying, or even discrimination and exclusion. Or they may not be making full use of their skills and feel they have no clear development path.

Whatever the reason, a hostile workplace can have severe consequences for companies.

Warning signs

---

[1] https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-at-work
[2] https://www.mindsharepartners.org/mentalhealthatworkreport-2021
[3] https://www.mindsharepartners.org/mentalhealthatworkreport-2021

While many companies were highly supportive of employees while they isolated and worked from home during the Covid-19 pandemic, some bad workplace habits and conditions may resurface as workers gradually return to the office full-time

While it may be difficult for businesses to spot when employees are struggling with mental health issues caused by a negative work culture, there are some clear warning signs to look out for.

Some warning signs include team members withdrawing from group situations or isolating themselves from colleagues, potentially reducing collaboration and innovation in the workplace. Others may be absent more often due to illness, or show signs of lower productivity.

How to help

The good news is that there are a number of ways that team cultures can be improved to become more supportive environments for employees struggling with workplace-exacerbated mental health issues. One of the best ways to guard against an unhealthy culture is to put in place measures and practices that can encourage a safe and open culture.

According to the WHO, protecting and promoting mental health at work means employers should strengthen capacities to recognise and act on mental health conditions, particularly for those supervising others such as managers.[4]

Manager training on mental health issues can help them to recognise and respond to employees in emotional distress, build interpersonal skills such as open communication and active listening, and understand and manage workplace issues that affect mental health, it notes. In addition, training for employees in mental health literacy can raise awareness and reduce stigma in the workplace. And holding interventions for individuals can help build skills to manage stress and reduce mental health symptoms.

The WHO also recommends reasonable accommodations for employees with mental health conditions, such as flexible working hours, extra time to complete tasks or regular supportive meetings with supervisors.

In practice, there are many things that an employer can do to encourage a safer work culture. These include introducing employee assistance programmes, promoting effective communication, holding team-building activities, recognising when jobs are done well and having a zero tolerance policy for bullying behaviour, among other policies.

What we're doing for our Team

We work hard to create a positive workplace environment within the LC Financial Holdings companies because we know that this will lead to long-term success as well as being a key part of any company's corporate social responsibility (CSR) and ESG approach.

In 2022, our executive committee set clear goals for establishing our ESG programme, joining a range of recognisable and rigorous initiatives to deliver better outcomes for our investors, colleagues, clients and customers. Our ESG working committee includes representatives from each of our offices and is charged with implementing local initiatives and the overarching group policy and objectives.

We're working to include mental health and counselling support services within our employee medical care program and make sure colleagues know how to access them.

---

[4]https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-at-work

To promote team cohesion, we hold a regular social events as well as various team building activities and a number of clubs.

Wellbeing weeks are supported by the HR teams in all our offices during which people can try out relaxing activities such as yoga and meditation, and healthy eating is promoted.

We support flexible working to allow employees to manage home and work life more easily. There are also volunteering policies supporting team members to take some time away from work and give back to their communities.

And we've introduced a companywide blog as a channel through which all sorts of news and information can be shared so that communication is enhanced across our various international offices.

For us, creating a positive and open workplace for our colleagues is something that takes time and requires ongoing effort. The results aren't always immediately perceptible, but it feeds into our belief that we should be doing more than just seeking to be compliant with our regulatory obligations - it is the right way to operate.

Hannah Riley is a sustainability manager at Link Financial Group.

[ENDS]