



The Evolving Need for Mental and Behavioral Health Literacy

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Historically, mental health was not discussed or even acknowledged in the workplace. It was a taboo topic that was generally considered off-limits and out of bounds. Mental health was viewed as “over there” in some vague sense, resting with a few employees who experienced mental health struggles. As the saying goes, people were encouraged to “check their baggage at the door.”

Over time, human resources (HR) departments and employee benefit leaders recognized the need to provide resources to support mental health, predominantly through employee assistance programs (EAPs). Unfortunately, EAP services have long been misunderstood by employees, often resulting in low utilization even though EAPs typically offer counseling at no cost to employees.

As is often said, COVID changed everything, and it certainly illuminated the extent to which everyone is vulnerable to mental health struggles. Now that quarantines have ended and people feel more comfortable returning to either hybrid or in-person work, it’s become evident that addressing mental health in the workplace is a business imperative.

However, the way mental well-being is addressed needs to be prioritized among leadership and integrated systemically within organizations. A successful approach requires leaders to commit to workforce well-being with explicit and sustained efforts to support mental health. Leaders model by example, and prioritizing mental health is no excep-

tion. Leaders could benefit by remaining aware of trends regarding workforce stressors on employees and learning the language and skills needed to support well-being. Mental health literacy could be adopted in the same way effective leaders have mastered financial literacy, which includes comfort with the numbers and language, knowledge of financial market trends, and the ability to predict and prepare for financially precarious times.

Optimal mental health literacy includes knowledge and skill-building, recognizing the interplay of workflow and

AT A GLANCE

- Leaders should prioritize addressing mental health in the workplace and integrate it systemically in an organization. Leaders would benefit by adopting mental health literacy, which includes knowledge of mental health issues and trends as well as skill-building to respond to needs.
- Financial stress, caregiving responsibilities and substance use are emerging issues that negatively impact employee mental health.
- Skills that leaders can develop to address workplace mental health include soft (human) skills such as displaying empathy and vulnerability and how to have difficult conversations. Leaders also should assess how work gets done and how it affects employee well-being and productivity.

stress as well as the ability to respond to needs. If there is any doubt about the urgency to address this matter, consider a recent study by the Workforce Institute at UKG that found that 69% of people indicated that their managers had the greatest impact on their mental health, even more than their partner or therapist.

The Model of Mental Health

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “Mental health is an integral and essential component of health.” WHO further describes overall health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Many organizations prefer to use a broad term such as well-being. WHO defines *well-being* as:

[A] positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions. Well-being encompasses quality of life and the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose. Focusing on well-being supports the tracking of the equitable distribution of resources, overall thriving and sustainability. WHO stipulates that a society’s well-being can be determined by the extent to which it is resilient, builds capacity for action, and is prepared to transcend challenges.

Another commonly used term, *emotional well-being*, has been defined by the National Institutes of Health as “an overall positive state of one’s emotions, life satisfaction, sense of meaning and purpose, and ability to pursue self-defined goals.”

The common themes across these definitions of overall well-being and mental health include connection with community, productivity, a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and resilience in the face of challenges. In any mention of well-being as a path forward, it is imperative to include mental health. The use of broad terms such as *well-being* is an appropriate way to build mental health awareness in the workplace with the explicit understanding that all definitions and discussions consider mental health as an essential aspect of overall well-being.

The Evolution of Workplace Mental Health: Past, Present and Future

Leaders must stay focused on the health of the organization—its financial health as well as the health of its workforce. Leaders who understand and appreciate this balance are those who recognize that workforce health is the contemporary human capital management strategy. As with anything that evolves, it builds upon yesteryear’s lessons learned. And, in some cases, that evolution is playing catch-up.

Leadership is dynamic and adaptive. Effective leadership is not one-size-fits-all. Now more than ever, it is critical that leaders reconsider how they view and approach the workforce and their mental health. The figure on page 10 captures how this evolutionary development is occurring.

Workplace Mental Health and Human Capital Management




Human capital risk management is the conservation of an organization’s human and financial assets. Since the onset of the pandemic and beyond, mental health has been top of mind for business leaders in all sectors. The effects of mental health have been well-documented with growing accounts of absenteeism, tardiness, presenteeism, and even mass resignations and the so-called “quiet quitting” movement. Gaps in the workforce mean that some sectors are unable to fill hundreds of thousands of jobs, thereby impacting productivity at the level of the company, industry and overall economy.

In this environment, workplace culture matters more today than ever before. Leading employers have been embracing purpose and engagement by enhancing the employee experience through the human resources (HR) life cycle. This life cycle consists broadly of talent recruitment and selection, onboarding, development and learning, engagement and retention, total rewards, performance assessment and career management. A clear pattern has emerged—Employee benefits have become an increasingly important tool in workforce recruiting and retention. Many HR and benefit leaders describe the critical role of group health and voluntary benefits as either a deal-breaker or deal-maker in recruiting and retention.

FIGURE

Evolution of Leadership Approaches to Mental Health

Leadership is evolving. Leaders must stay focused on the health of the organization—both its financial health and the health of its workforce. Leaders who appreciate this balance recognize that the **health of the workforce is the contemporary human capital management imperative.** Programs, practices and policies should be embedded in the operations of an organization to reach people for impact.

Leadership Style	Authoritative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top-down • Command and control 	Situational <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top-down/bottom-up • Continuous improvement 	Servant <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative • Innovative mindset
Attitude Toward Mental Health	Reactive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Act only in dire situations • Personal problems hidden • Mental health and therapy were stigmatized 	Responsive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased awareness to address crisis situations • Beginning to normalize • Expanding resources 	Preventive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on resilience • Parity with physical health • Rigorous systems and access to robust resources
Expression	“Check your baggage at the door.” 	“Is there an app for that?” 	“Let’s talk about what’s going to help.” 
	PAST	PRESENT	FUTURE

Expanding Areas of Emphasis in Human Resources and Employee Benefits Programs

The evolution of workplace mental health has occurred with generational acceptance of both speaking about and seeking help for mental health challenges. Before the pandemic, HR and employee benefit leaders felt growing pressure to expand workplace mental health services and resources. Since the onset of the pandemic, the need for mental health strategies, supports, services and solutions has grown exponentially. Moreover, the needs of employees and dependents on group health plans have grown increasingly complex. The following key areas are emerging as contemporary and future-focused opportunities for expanded employment benefit focus.

Financial Well-Being

Financial wellness has become an increasingly important benefit offering in this era of rising consumer prices, infla-

tionary pressures and soaring credit card debt. According to the *2023 PwC Employee Financial Wellness Survey*, “57% of workers reported finances as the top cause of stress in their lives.” PwC delineated several findings of how the impact of financial stress extends to the personal well-being of a rising number of workers:

- 56% reported impact on sleep
- 55% attributed finances to deteriorating mental health
- 44% reported adverse impact on physical health
- 40% said relationships at home have been impacted by financial pressures.

PwC also found that employees experiencing financial stress are almost five times more likely to disclose that these personal finance issues have affected their workplace engagement, productivity and performance. Not surprisingly, financial well-being becomes a lure for employees seeking to leave in pursuit of the proverbial “greener grass on the other side of the fence.” Specifically, employees with finan-

cial stress are two times more likely to be engaged in actively seeking a new job at 36% versus only 18% for those not reporting financial stress. PwC also reported that 73% of financially stressed employees would be attracted by a prospective employer that cares about their financial well-being versus 54% for employees not experiencing financial stress.

Challenges of Caregivers

Prior to the pandemic, surveys highlighted the growing prevalence and pressures of caregivers in the workplace. The National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP revealed that 61% of caregivers were employed in 2020. Not only did the number of caregivers increase, the percentage of caregivers providing care to multiple persons grew from 18% in 2015 to 24% in 2020. More troubling is that the percentage of family caregivers having trouble coordinating care grew from 19% to 25% in the same time frame. Finally, 23% of U.S. caregivers reported that caregiving had an adverse impact on their overall health.

Emphasis is growing among leading organizations to address caregiving needs through coordinated caregiving benefit programs. The 2022 *Employee Caregiving Survey* by Homethrive highlighted that nearly two-thirds of workers do not have access to a coordinated caregiving benefit. The survey highlighted the growing frequency and intensity of caregiving responsibilities. Moreover, “30% of employees report impact on work,” and “56% of employees worry that caregiving will negative-

ly impact their job performance.” A coordinated caregiving benefit program improves access to a broad range of services for employees who are heavily engaged in the demands of caregiving for dependents during temporary or longer term challenges. Such a program demonstrates a caring culture and reduces the pressures of caregiving on the employee by shifting responsibilities to counselors and coaches specialized in coordinating caregiving responsibilities.

Substance Misuse and Substance Use Disorders (SUDs) and Chronic Health Comorbidities

Awareness of the rising human and financial costs of substance misuse and from SUDs on the workforce is growing. The co-occurrence of mental health conditions and SUDs is well-known. This combination is generally described as the domain of behavioral health. Likewise, growing evidence points to the impact that the comorbidities of chronic health conditions associated with behavioral health have on total health care costs. A population health study by actuarial firm Milliman, which looked at 2017 data for 21 million lives in commercially insured programs, demonstrated that 10% of all claimants account for 70% of total claim costs. Health care spending for this high-cost claimant group averaged 21 times higher than the spend for the remaining 90% of claimants—the non-high cost group. A subset of the high-cost claimant group identified as the behavioral health subgroup comprised only 5.7% of all claimants

yet accounted for 44% of total health care spending.

This impact is expected to continue to rise. At the same time, both the U.S. and selected Canadian provinces expect increased drug overdose deaths with the ongoing North American opioid crisis. Employers are being urged to stock naloxone at workplaces and to provide increasing services and supports to promote treatment and recovery services for SUDs. This will include digital health solutions and peer-to-peer recovery coaching.

Aligning Mental Health Literacy to Strengthen Leadership Competencies

The following skills are recommended as a model for building mental health competencies for leadership.

1. Identifying the Problem to Be Solved

Leaders should learn information about commonly occurring mental health struggles, such as anxiety, depression and addiction (e.g., substance use and behavioral addictions such as screens/social media/gaming and gambling). According to a large-scale study on workforce well-being by the American Heart Association (AHA) pre-COVID, 76% of employees indicated that they had struggled with at least one issue that affected their mental health. In the same survey, 42% of employees answered yes when asked if they had ever been diagnosed with a mental health disorder. Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) found that anxiety, depression and substance misuse increased

dramatically during the pandemic (KFF, 2021). COVID continues to impact mental health and, by extension, workplace functioning (KFF, 2023).

2. Empathy, Vulnerability and Decision Making

Soft skills are human skills that inform tough decisions and strong leadership. Vulnerability in leadership has been a hot topic over the past several years, with business leaders and social scientists talking about the need for vulnerability in individual and team leadership. As an example, in 2020, the Forbes Communications Council identified the many ways vulnerability translates to strength in leadership.

In addition to informing decision making, vulnerability that is thoughtfully and intentionally modeled by leadership supports mental health among their workforces. When leaders share that they too are looking for answers and that struggles have touched their lives, employees have permission to acknowledge their own sense of vulnerability. Leadership teams may fear that once this happens, the floodgates will open, and mental health concerns will pour through unbridled. Therefore, key aspects of vulnerability and empathic leadership are planning and setting boundaries.

3. Difficult Conversations/ Negotiating Conflict

The ability to engage in difficult conversations, often those that involve perceived conflict or delivering negative news, may seem daunting. An online survey by Harris Poll found that 69%

of managers say they often are uncomfortable communicating with employees in general and not just about mental health. Further, Gallup has provided comprehensive survey findings that managers are on the front lines of hearing about and supporting team members when they experience a crisis.

4. Recognizing the Connection Between Employee Well-Being and Business Success

Leaders should be aware that the way work gets done—processes, methods, teamwork—affects one's well-being and productivity. Leaders can model efficient and quality work methods through systems and continual evaluation to ensure best practices, thereby improving productivity and reducing undue stress. The aforementioned Workforce Institute at UKG study found that 35% of leaders reported being stressed at work with 42% saying it was because of the stress they put on themselves. Leaders can assess the effectiveness of organizational systems that either facilitate or impede workflows and regularly attend to process improvements. Incorporating employee input when needed and helpful is key to socializing and implementing process change.

5. Genuineness

Trust has been identified as one of the key factors in successful leadership. According to Steven Covey, to build trust, leaders need to communicate consistently, be appropriately transparent and follow through on their promises. Being genuine through language

and behaviors is a core way to build trust. People can tell when an individual is trying to behave in genuine ways versus being truly authentic—Leaders shouldn't *act* genuinely, they should *be* genuine.


6. Developing Emerging Leaders

Preparing future leaders for success requires fostering the ability to manage workforce well-being. While generational differences regarding career choices and views of mental health do exist, it is important to not overgeneralize or overreact to these differences. With significant concerns about labor needs across sectors, many companies are creating next-generation leadership programs to bolster interest and retain talented employees. Forecasting shows an anticipated labor shortage in fields such as health care, construction, retail and financial sectors. Supporting emerging leaders requires an openness to having conversations regarding generational differences in viewing work culture, expectations, innovation and mental health.

Strategies for Leaders

Educating, equipping and empowering leaders at all levels is a cultural imperative for companies seeking to leverage investments in human capital risk management by expanding emphasis on workplace mental health. The future of work is focused on the future of people. Effective workplace mental health requires leaders who are committed, confident and competent to address the needs of employee mental health and well-being effectively and

empathically. These suggested strategies offer a framework for reinforcing leadership support for workplace mental health.

1. Engage senior leadership in the organization to incorporate mental health and well-being as a foundation of an inclusive and caring culture. Communicating the company's top-down commitment reinforces the prioritization of well-being and reminds employees that everyone has a role to play in mental health and well-being.
2. Expand the commitment to workplace mental health and well-being by incorporating both physical and emotional health into the company's safety/health and wellness programs.
3. Weave mental health and well-being into the organization's onboarding and orientation processes and share resources about employee benefit programs, EAPs and any available point solutions for mental and behavioral health that the organization has selected. Share robust resources regarding crisis hotlines and nonprofit and social service organizations offering physical and mental health resources and services.
4. Commit resources to educate, equip and empower leaders at all levels to expand their mental health literacy, competencies and resources. Examples of essential human skills to be included in a leadership toolkit are:
 - Verbalizing organizational intent to prioritize mental health in the workforce
 - Consistent communication about mental health as part of overall well-being
 - Commitment to mental health literacy by learning and applying pertinent facts and approaches
 - Transparency in leadership when possible and especially during times of uncertainty
 - Supporting managers by providing training to enhance their abilities to respond to their own well-being needs and those of their team
 - Modeling behaviors for fellow leaders and employees, especially empathy and vulnerability, to promote a mentally health culture. 

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