CLM

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Employee Mental Health and Its Impact on Productivity and Performance

Introduction

There is growing awareness that employee mental health impacts organizational productivity and performance. Production demands, financial woes, chronic pain, and relationship strain can all create added stress and anxiety at the workplace. Heightened strain around COVID-19 magnified workplace tension and put further pressure on employee mental health and emotional well-being. Some employees were anxious about bringing COVID-19 home to their families and loved ones. Others were subject to threats and violence as they attempted to enforce protective measures such as enforcing mask-wearing policies.

The industry has long recognized that physical injuries and disabilities can result in lost workdays and increasing costs but little regard has been given to mental well-being and behavioral health matters. To the contrary, mental illnesses and behavioral disorders have frequently gone undetected or under-reported largely due to the social stigma placed on such conditions or limited access to mental health resources. Ironically, the COVID-19 pandemic has helped elevate the subject.

Employee mental health and well-being impact productivity and performance

Entering 2021, most organizations are under tremendous financial pressures and production demands having been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Managers recognize that physical injuries and disabilities can result in lost workdays and increasing costs but they often overlook the impact mental well-being and behavioral health matters can have on departmental performance and the company's bottom line. What's more is the pandemic disruption has likely created more mental health deficiencies and strains than at any time in our recent past.

Because they can be hard to see, mental illnesses and behavioral disorders are frequently undetected or under-reported. This can also stem from the stigma and social prejudice that have historically been placed on such conditions. And yet, stress, anxiety, and depression are among the top factors driving absenteeism and presenteeism in the workplace.

A greater number of employees are coming to work with post -traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD). PTSD is a mental condition that affects individuals who have experienced or witnessed a horrific event. The condition is typically associated with combat veterans who are returning home to resume civilian life. First responders and medical personnel are also commonly associated with PTSD because they routinely confront scenes involving the graphic aftermath of violent crimes, highway wreckage, natural disasters, or emergency room decisions. Recent school shootings, store robberies and job-related fatalities underscore the need to address PTSD on a much broader basis. For example, a person may have been the victim of assault, domestic violence, or car crash and bring associated consequences to the workplace including flashbacks or severe anxiety. This can impact the safety and productivity of that individual and those around them.

Undeniably, both physical and mental well-being are needed for maximum workplace performance and productivity. They are also needed to facilitate a timely and effective recovery when an injury, illness, or disability occurs.   Once challenges are identified, solutions can be explored and executed with high levels of effectiveness. The good news is employers have begun to realize the importance of creating and supporting an organizational culture of health and well-being in a variety of ways.

Employers become enlightened about employee mental health issues

No one wants to be isolated or feel excluded. And yet, this is what many employees feel after disclosing and reaching out for help for mental health struggles. Either real or perceived, this feeling of being shunned can deter many individuals from discussing their situation and seeking assistance for what can be very treatable conditions. Often, this unconscious discrimination or social bias can arise at the workplace due to a lack of understanding or possible fear of mental health conditions.

Stamping out stigma has come to represent the initiatives and actions some employers are taking to reduce and eliminate the prejudice and social isolation experienced by those with mental health challenges. While society is comfortable talking about physical impairments such as a broken leg, psoriasis, or diabetes, a lack of understanding has often pushed the conversation around mental health challenges aside. This is somewhat surprising given the numbers who report having experienced mental health challenges and it is unfortunate in that this societal stigma often prevents individuals from seeking treatment.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), an estimated 25% of adults have a diagnosable mental illness and the group projects that 50% will develop at least one mental health challenge during their lifetime.[1] Further, a 2014 national survey on drug use and health found that the top three reasons that adults did not seek mental health services were that they could not afford the cost; thought they could handle the problem without treatment; or they did not know where to go for services. Moreover, 10.6% of the survey respondents reported that seeking such services might cause neighbors/community to have a negative opinion; 9.5% of survey participants feared it might have a negative effect on their jobs; 7.8% reported they were concerned about confidentiality; and 7.2% did not want others to find out.[2]

By deterring an individual from discussing or seeking needed treatment for mental health challenges, the social prejudice and negative stigma around such challenges are serious

concerns that negatively impact both the employer and employee. However, there are some proactive steps that employers can take to reduce or eliminate this type of stigma at the workplace.

Employers take proactive steps to address employee mental health needs

Some practical steps employers can take to improve their overall cultures of health and bring greater awareness to the need for mental health and well-being include:

Integrate physical and mental well-being. Benefit managers and risk managers are learning to collaborate to find better solutions to address overall health and well-being. Today, these leaders are integrating health, wellness and safety programs, expanding return to work programs to accommodate both occupational and non-occupational injuries and illnesses, and expanding communication and education programs to raise awareness of these types of issues.

Educate managers and supervisors. Employers are increasing awareness around the importance of mental health at the workplace, the impact it can have on both employees and operations, and the availability of resources to address these matters. Managers and supervisors are being trained to better understand mental health conditions, identify and address behaviors that might warrant outreach, and to reduce stigma surrounding mental health needs.

Stamp out stigma and social prejudice. Eliminating mental health stigma and social prejudice is critical. Increased education and awareness in the workplace can help mitigate or eliminate labeling and misconceptions that create barriers to those seeking mental health treatment or other accommodations. Employees need to feel that reaching out for assistance will not result in penalties and will produce real benefits. Peer advocates and peer support programs can be beneficial. Additionally, exposure and interaction with people who have successfully overcome stigma, societal prejudice and other challenges in their own lives can also provide a source of assistance to those employees who are challenged.

Use empathy to connect with employees. We can never forget that at the center of every physical or mental health struggle is an individual person. Empathy can help a manager, supervisor, or co-worker connect with that individual leading to more positive outcomes. Kindness and consideration at the workplace are invaluable. Employers are learning that less emphasis on managing costs and production and a greater concern for the overall well-being of workers can produce dividends.

Increase employee engagement. Greater employee engagement can lead to greater productivity. Once workers feel they are being heard and supported, they are more likely to become engaged. This can lead to their responding to phone calls, submitting requested documentation on time, and working with providers and other experts who can offer assistance. By focusing on an individual's needs, employers are better able to engage workers, secure the assistance needed and ultimately foster increased productivity.

Secure management support. An organization's management team must understand the scope of the problem and provide necessary resources to those impacted. Moreover, they need to understand the importance of creating a welcoming and supportive environment to those who are struggling or coping with both physical and mental health challenges. This type of workplace culture and environment must be driven from the top.

Establish strong employee assistance program. A strong and effective employee assistance program is often reflective of a progressive and compassionate corporate culture. Such programs offer access to high quality professionals who specialize in emotional and behavioral health issues. They are able to provide counseling and resources needed to help individuals overcome both physical and mental health challenges. Moreover, team leaders must be aware of the resources that are available to support individuals needing assistance and how to connect employees with these resources. They must also understand the organization's stance toward overall health and well-being. They are important in creating a supporting environment where people are

not afraid to discuss their challenges or ask for help. There is value to having the right resources available early in the process when initial outreach for help is made.

Conclusion

Undeniably, both physical and mental well-being are needed for maximum workplace performance and productivity. They are also needed to facilitate a timely and effective recovery when an injury, illness, or disability occurs.   The good news is employers have begun to address cultures of health and well-being in a variety of ways.

Doing the right thing in each case includes making sure the employee has access to the medical resources they need, listening to their concerns, showing compassion, and being available to assist at every turn. Supportive, collaborative service focused on honoring the whole person is an effective strategy for improving productivity and performance.