Mental Health and Work

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When Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon and marched his troops south to establish the new Roman Empire, there was no going back. I dare say we have crossed our own Rubicon with the campaign to address mental health at work. Reaching the c-suite of companies around the globe, corporate leaders are taking up the cause and grappling with what it means to make mental health matter at work.

Not so long ago, I was asked to give a talk to leaders of a large multinational corporation about mental health, with the understanding that I would not actually say the words "mental health." It would be off-putting. Fast forward to 2021. Mental health is making headlines everywhere. The pandemic has placed this formerly taboo topic front and center. Upending many default settings of daily life, it has catalyzed rethinking how we work and how we organize our workplaces. A [recent set of studies](#) by McKinsey highlighted the disconnect between employers and employees when it comes to mental health at work. What can employers do to better address workplace mental health as we move forward in what will eventually be a post-pandemic world?

1. Be Bold, Act Smart. Cliche as it might sound, real change starts at the top. Advancing mental health at work depends on leaders prioritizing the issue – for real. The good news from the [McKinsey research](#) is that 80% of employers surveyed reported concern about their employees' mental health. The not so good news is that three-quarters had delegated responsibility for improving mental health at work to someone else, with only 40% being at the executive level. That won't do. What is at stake is real culture change, and that can only come from one place: the top.

2. Close the Gap. The disconnect between what exists and what employees need is far too great. The mental health services that most companies offer fall short for many reasons. Traditional Employee Assistance Plans (EAPs) have notoriously [low utilization rates](#). If corporations around the globe are going to recognize mental health and wellness as core to their purpose, they will need to revisit how and what services are offered. The workforce today is radically different from the time when most companies put their EAP in place. Recruitment, retention, and reputation depend on updating offerings to close this mental health at work gap.

3. Enhance Communications. It matters what leaders say. It matters even more what they communicate by their actions. When organizational leaders use their visibility and status to amplify discussion about mental health with their employees, they play a pivotal role in reducing stigma and indifference towards these issues. When leaders take actions to support their own mental health and make systemic changes to protect and promote employee mental health, the message is clear. They are building a culture that normalizes mental health needs. They are cultivating a culture of trust.

4. Cultivate an inclusive culture free from mental-health stigma. The vast majority of company leaders in the McKinsey survey acknowledged significant stigma around mental illness in the workplace today. Employees agree. Stigma is a pervasive barrier that can inhibit ability to access care, and eliminating it is key to building a culture inclusive to mental health. Although 80% of employees perceived it would be valuable, less than 25% of companies represented in the study have actually conducted a mental health anti-stigma campaign. Getting good mental health programs and practices into the DNA of an organization also means investing in training to equip all employees with tools to support each other (e.g.,recognizing signs of distress), and fostering connectivity (e.g, through employee-led communities of intention).

5. We do what we measure, so we need to measure what matters. Addressing mental health at work is a big idea. Translating it into practice requires knowing specifically what problem we are trying to solve and articulating what success looks like. We live in an era of big data. Why should mental health be any different? Applying a critical and evidence-based lens to the implementation of mental health initiatives in the workplace makes sense – and cents. What does that mean? We need good measurement so that we can know whether mental health initiatives at work *actually* work.

Mental health at work is about mental health in life. For most people, over the course of a lifetime, we spend more time [working](#) than any other activity besides sleeping. Making employee mental health and wellness a core metric of workplace performance is the right and good thing to do. Employees will be better off. Workplaces will be better off. The world will be better off. We have crossed the Rubicon for mental health.