



# Promoting employee mental health through a culture of safety and wellbeing

by Dr. George Vergolias

## TIPS

- 1. Promote a culture of respect** and integrity by demonstrating such in everyday interactions, no matter how small.
- 2. Educate employees on understanding healthy emotional functioning**, recognizing signs of behavioral health symptoms, and how to self-regulate emotions.
- 3. Help employees recognize when they or co-workers are struggling emotionally** and teach them what resources are available to help.
- 4. Empower employees to find their role in your community** in ways that help them feel valued, and be open and direct with them so they have the information they need to thrive.
- 5. Build a culture of candor through which you provide honest feedback** people can use to self-assess and improve. Don't water down feedback.

## ACCORDING TO THE CENTERS

for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), mental health disorders are among the most burdensome health concerns in the United States. Nearly one in five Americans age 18 or older reported a mental illness in 2016. Since approximately 63 percent of Americans are part of the U.S. labor force, supporting employees' mental health in the workplace is vital.

Not only is taking care of our employees the right thing to do, mental health issues can also have a direct effect on businesses' bottom lines. Unfortunately, in addition to the everyday stressors affecting employees' mental health, over the past few years, workplaces have increasingly had to address a host of concerning behaviors, including bullying, sexual harassment, increased incidence of suicidality, anger/hostility, and overt acts of predatory violence in the form of mass shootings.

Recently, California Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) passed a regulation requiring healthcare facilities to have a formal workplace violence plan, and we are seeing movement that similar requirements will expand to many other industries across the country. Behavioral health and workplace violence are top concerns impacting the work environment.

As employers, we have much to be concerned about, yet there are some key areas we can focus on to promote workplace safety and wellbeing:

## Promote a culture of respect and integrity

This seems easy, but perhaps is the most difficult outcome to achieve. Respect and integrity are not taught or

trained, they are demonstrated, daily, in everyday interactions that can seem minimal and across all levels of an organization. Nothing erodes a culture of respect and integrity as much as when leadership allows disrespectful and inappropriate behaviors to continue.

Promoting respect and integrity begins at the time of hire and continues through every interaction of an employee's pathway in the organization. Lack of these cultural values often leads to conflict, withdrawal, fear of taking risks, and, in the most extreme cases, overt violence. In fact, the single most common reason that disgruntled employees who returned to their workplace to commit violence give for their actions is their perception of not being treated fairly and with respect.

## Educate employees to improve behavioral health literacy and wellbeing

Given generational differences in attitudes around mental health, most adults in the workforce were not raised with heavy attention placed on wellbeing, self-care, emotional regulation and conflict resolution. These are learned skills. Educating employees on understanding healthy emotional functioning, recognizing early signs of behavioral health symptoms and how to self-regulate emotions is energy well spent toward building an emotionally healthy and thriving work culture.

## Recognize when co-workers are struggling emotionally

Help employees recognize when they or their co-workers are struggling emotionally, to identify these problems upstream prior to the issue becoming a full-blown crisis or behavioral health disorder. Some early

warning signs might include: changes in mood, emotional withdrawal, increased anxiety, irritability, hostility, growing distrust of others, rapid onset or escalation of substance use, developing apathy and loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities. Early intervention is always more effective than later intervention, but that starts with awareness of the problem.

### **Provide useful tools to assist others in crisis**

Once employees recognize a developing problem within themselves or in others, they then need to know what to do next. Where do they go? Who do they talk to? What resources are available? It's very important to provide them the tools and pathways to get the help they need, at any level of a crisis. These can be contacting peer support groups, calling employee assistance program (EAP) resources, engaging community resources, and/or using digital support applications to assist.

An example: At R3 Continuum, where I work, we saw such a high need for this in the workplace that we developed R3SILIENCY, an artificial intelligence (AI) smartphone/tablet app that assists employees and organizational leaders navigating an emotional crisis. The app helps people maximize internal resilience by accessing best-practice treatment guidelines, offering education and training on self-care techniques, enhancing organizational connectedness at times of crisis and increasing adaptive coping at both the individual and organizational levels.

### **Empower employees and promote environmental mastery**

"Environmental mastery" refers to how we interact with the world and to what extent we can shape our experiences to fit our values and priorities. It is essentially "finding your communi-

ty," and then finding your role in it in a way that helps one feel valued. That can only come through empowering employees to reach further and seize opportunities. To be clear, this does not mean giving away responsibility, authority or power to those who are not ready for such or have not earned such. Rather, it is believing enough in a person's capabilities, strength and resilience to be open, honest and direct with them, thus allowing them to make informed choices to thrive.

### **Build a culture of candor**

There is a great quip about resilience: "Every time you told yourself you couldn't go on, you did." We don't always recognize our resilience, and far too often in the workforce we erroneously assume others don't have it. We assume they can't take candor or honesty. For me, nothing is more insulting.

Empowerment and candor are related. Empowerment is about honest dialogue — at times tough dialogue — that can help the person self-assess and improve. I recall years ago receiving some feedback from a supervisor, which I perceived as harsh. It was certainly negative, and I had much to improve, but the delivery was open, honest and matter-of-fact. My supervisor did not coddle me or water down the feedback and, in the process, told me "I'm sharing this because I know you can do better, you're strong enough to take the constructive criticism, and it will help you to grow."

The above recommendations are not an exhaustive list but serve as high-level guidelines for developing and promoting a workplace culture of respect, integrity and safety, and one in which employees thrive.



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