

Reflection: What Kind of Mental Health Manager Are You?

Our cultural background and own attitudes toward and experience with mental health, combined with our personality types, influence how we respond to mental health issues in our teams. We can learn a lot from our own experiences but by definition they are narrow, and should be recognized as such. For example, even if you have been a caregiver you don't know how another experiences his or her own process. Try not to project your own experience as you try to understand what another might be going through.

Avoid bringing pre-conceived notions into this conversation. We might have a tendency to project from our own past experience, or of friends and family. In psychology this is referred to as transference. Being aware of it can help us understand our emotions towards particular situations and not become overwhelmed by them—but also not having us behave in the most productive ways in sensitive interactions with colleagues, i.e. telling a subordinate or colleague, “I know what you’re going through because this is just like my Aunt Sally was” is not helpful. Ms. C noted, “As a manager, I should not bring the spillage of my own emotional intensity. We don’t want managers acting as clinicians nor making assumptions about what others need.”

You can share your own experience if appropriate as a way to feel and show empathy for the *general* situation, not the *specific* one that your colleague is facing. Opening up about your own experience can help develop trust and intimacy with your colleague, as well as signal that you are there to provide some advice should that be desirable – and that you are there for them, that they are not alone.

However, tackling these issues can be trying for a manager in this scenario as well, depending on the emotional baggage they elicit. It might be difficult for someone who had an abusive alcoholic father to maintain a caring, therapeutic interaction when addressing alcoholism or substance abuse in an employee, for example.

Equally important is trying not to assume you know what decisions individuals might want to make in the situations in which they find themselves. For example do not arbitrarily withhold offering an employee a promotion or overseas deployment because he or she has revealed a depressive episode and you are *assuming* that they will not want the additional stress of the promotion. The new job could be a better fit for them; it may even be their dream job.

Managers need to balance the needs of the individual, their colleagues, and the organization. “You need to remember what is realistic and desirable for the context in which you are operating,” Ms. C cautioned. “Even when managers are very supportive and encourage individuals to ‘take the time you need,’ the result is that people who are doing your work are overburdened. It is very challenging to separate out and balance human needs, the needs of other employees, and business needs.”

Managers need to consider the following:

- When you confront these issues, are you focused on yourself, the employee or the firm? What is driving your focus?
- All approaches have some advantages and costs. Are you clear about what the consequences will be for you? Your team?

- How have you behaved in past situations?
- After reflecting on your tendencies, try to predict how you are likely to behave next time you are presented with a similar situation.

Managers must be careful to strike a balance between well-intentioned efforts and overstepping in a manner that can be potentially detrimental to mental health. We don't advocate a form of "helicopter management," whereby managers hover "over their employees in a well-intentioned attempt to provide support or a compulsive need to micro-manage or provide unnecessary guidance. These are givers gone awry—people so desperate to help others that they develop a white knight complex, and end up causing harm instead. . .

. [H]elicopter managers prevent recipients from becoming independent and competent, disrupting their learning and confidence for future tasks. In focusing on the short-term benefits of helping, helicopter managers overlook the long-term costs."[\[i\]](#)

Most managers exhibit a mix of approaches, depending on their own situations, personalities and organizational context. In **Chart 2** we very broadly sketch a set of managerial profiles developed from our research and observations, a spectrum from overprotective ("Kangaroo") to avoidant ("Ostrich") or downright nefarious ("Hyena").