

Mental Health at Work Needs a Reboot

IPMR HR | Laura Putnam | June 2022

Three suicides during one week involving one U.S. Navy aircraft carrier. This was the shocking story for the crew of the USS George H.W. Bush making headlines in September 2019.

Fast forward to April 2022, and the story eerily repeats, with three sailors assigned to the USS George Washington taking their own lives within the span of a single week. In both cases, the Navy had invested heavily in mental health services and suicide prevention. Yet, sailors continue to die by suicide. Why?



For the better part of the past two decades, the growing mental health crisis in the United States has been largely ignored, dismissed as an individual problem to be referred to experts or avoided altogether as a topic too taboo to openly discuss. Tragic events like those among Bush and Washington crew members, however, prove organizations can no longer afford to sweep mental health under the rug. Nor can organizations continue to frame mental health as an individual issue best handled by people on their own.

Any organization that is serious about addressing mental health in the workplace needs to take a more outside-in approach, one that better addresses the culture and the environment. "Is our organization a naval ship in the making?" is a very real question every leader needs to ask and answer with all due speed and seriousness.

A Long-Building Crisis

The mental health crisis is not new. It has, in fact, been building for decades. The coronavirus pandemic merely accelerated trends already gaining steam.

According to the CDC, suicide rates increased by 30 percent between 2000 and 2020. Today, one might say that the second act of the pandemic is its added toll on our mental health.

A study led by Boston University researcher Catherine K. Ettman and reported on the JAMA Network website on Sept. 2, 2020, revealed that rates of depression for U.S. adults had tripled since the onset of the pandemic. On Feb. 10, 2021, the Kaiser Family Foundation shared results from its tracking polling showing rising numbers of individuals reporting symptoms of distress such as difficulty sleeping, overeating and increased alcohol consumption. Levels of loneliness have also skyrocketed, especially for young people, and burnout continues to mount. On the

work front, research cited in a Feb. 10, 2021, Harvard Business Review article by Jennifer Moss showed 89 percent of employees were reporting that their work life had gotten worse.

What Organizations Can Do

The first step toward meeting this critical moment is recognizing that employees' mental health should be treated just like any other sickness or ailment. As Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin succinctly puts it when addressing situations such as the tragic suicides of Washington sailors, "Mental health is health, period." He repeats the lesson often.

Second, employers must discern and deliver what their employees want.

Employees, now more than ever before, are voting with their feet. The Great Resignation started during the summer of 2021 and shows no sign of slowing. The willingness of employees to change jobs underscores what has been true all along: They want to feel connected with what matters most.

Employees overwhelmingly want flexibility, dignity at work, a sense of belonging and to feel cared for by their employer and their boss. In today's world, the well-being of every employee—as the employee defines it—is not a nice-to-have. It's a must-have.

Third, discussions about mental health need to be brought out into the open. This starts with every leader putting the old-school "Check your emotions at the door" mentality to rest. Maintaining the pretense that some things are better left unsaid no longer serves anyone well, and it especially ill-serves younger workers. When Monster polled job seekers between the ages of 18 and 24, 91 percent indicated they want to be able to talk about their mental health at work.

Leaders can set a new tone across the organization by encouraging open dialogue. Cisco CEO Chuck Robbins did this when he sent an email to all company employees urging them to prioritize their mental health and engage in open conversations with their coworkers.

Even better, as demonstrated by tech CEO Joel Gascoigne, leaders should model vulnerability. The founder of small business social media toolkit developer Buffer opened up to employees about his struggles with burnout.

In addition to setting a more open tone around mental health, leaders need to move away from the prevalent approach of just identifying at-risk individuals and connecting them with the resources they need. Leaders must take a more systems-based approach. Doing that requires, at a minimum, asking and answering the following questions:

- Is the workload unsustainable, and is the time pressure too great?
- Is there workplace conflict that has gone unaddressed and unresolved?
- Do employees feel valued?
- Are employees encouraged to talk openly about their problems, or are they told to check their emotions at the door?

These are just a few of the kinds of questions leaders need to stop and ask themselves instead of blaming the employee for the way they feel and offering token wellness programs that do little to resolve root causes, which are often intrinsic to the workplace.

Last, managers have a key role to play in supporting a systems-based approach to helping employees deal with mental health challenges. The key is to empower managers to become multipliers of well-being. Organizations do this by providing managers training, tools and encouragement to carve out an oasis of well-being within their teams.

For example, managers can be coached on practices and rituals such as walking meetings and weekly check-ins. They can be trained to kick off team meetings with emotion-boosting rituals like “5-3-1,” when everyone takes five deep breaths, names three good things and commits to performing one random act of kindness. Such simple team-based exercises, when performed consistently, help employees feel better and show employees that their manager and organization care about their well-being.

Also, as detailed in a June 2, 2020, Forbes article, manager-driven movements of well-being can produce bottom-line benefits. Schindler Elevator Corporation saw levels of employee engagement skyrocket after managers received training on serving as well-being activators.

By recognizing mental health for what it is and tackling the issue from the outside-in, workplaces will be able to support their employees’ mental health. Supporting employees’ mental health will, in turn, reduce absenteeism, improve productivity and help workplaces attract and retain employees. Not only is this good for employees’ overall well-being, it also makes good business sense—a true win-win for everyone.