2 Keys to Improving Leaders' Mental and Emotional Wellbeing

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The past few years have not been easy for anyone. According to a survey by The Standard (the marketing arm of StanCorp Financial Group) conducted at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, close to half of U.S workers admitted to struggling with their mental health. Business leaders are certainly not immune to such challenges; in fact, it's all too easy for them to prioritize the health of a company over their own wellbeing, but the truth is that an enterprise cannot thrive if its leaders aren't physically and psychologically sound. It's essential for the health of a company (and the individuals within it, according to *Psychology Today*) that they take care of themselves.

I've had ups and downs with my own emotional health as an executive, and through trial and error I have found two key practices that prevent it from declining and affecting my business: being transparent and taking ownership.

Transparency: the good, the bad and the ugly

It's a natural instinct to exclusively share good news and leave out the bad. A quick scroll through social media will be testament to that — a slideshow of new houses, lavish vacations, exciting promotions and fabulous parties.

We see this at work, too. Stories abound of new and exciting startups where everything seems to be going swimmingly. But then, surprise, the company goes bankrupt and employees and investors are left scratching their heads, wondering what happened.

As leaders, we have to be transparent with team members and investors about the good and bad. A lack thereof is not only unfair to those you work with, it also isolates you as a leader, which makes it harder to ask for help. In sharing circumstances freely, you build trust with a team and give yourself the opportunity to learn from others and identify creative solutions.

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What transparency can look like

In my company, I provide regular updates on the status of the business to my investors, and in part because I have openly shared achieved goals as well as setbacks, they have followed along and supported me throughout. For example, my company is currently in the middle of a fundraising push, which is not my area of expertise. Almost all of my investors, as it turns out, are professional fundraisers, so I asked for their perspectives on our efforts. I had no fear that they would judge me for doing so because we have built a basis of trust and transparency. If I had been afraid to share anything negative, I would be likewise fearful of asking for their advice, and our fundraising efforts would suffer.

How to start

You don’t need to share everything with the entirety of staff or board members right away. Perhaps start with just one person — a close advisor or longtime colleague. Then the next

time you are in need, you might be open to sharing with two people, then five, then 10, and eventually the entire company. In time, you will begin to see how valuable outside feedback and support are to success. Of course, there may be times when you cannot be fully transparent (for legal reasons, for instance), but that is the exception, not the rule.

Obstacles are table stakes on the path to success, and you will need a supportive team behind you if you are going to tackle them, but it cannot be built without trust, and trust cannot be built without transparency. So, don't isolate yourself. Business is full of ups and downs, and if you only share the things that get done, you will find yourself alone without very much to share.

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Take ownership of mistakes

The second key to maintaining good mental health as a leader is taking ownership. When things go wrong, oftentimes we want to point the finger at someone else. However, successful leaders are those who take responsibility.

For the first company I founded, I hired a local sales team. Its members processed false sales data to improve their numbers and had inflated egos concerning their abilities. We had to fire them, and I instantly felt hostile. "They messed up my company," I thought. "How can I possibly move on?"

Eventually, I realized that the blame lay in *my* hands. I was the one who had hired them and ignored the reference checks that told us this team could be abrasive. In order to move forward, I had to look at this mistake and own it. In doing that, I learned the importance of hiring people with integrity and who inspire others to work hard, and I have used that knowledge to build successful companies that win awards for

best places to work. This is a lesson I might never have internalized if I hadn't taken responsibility for my failure.

Shift your perspective

As a leader, you *will* make mistakes, but what matters more than the mistake itself is how you respond to it. Do you point the finger at someone else? Keep it hidden and let the shame build up inside of you? Or do you boldly look at it head-on, learn what you can and move forward?

The right approach requires a shift in perspective. Instead of exclaiming, "Why me?" and blaming others when something goes wrong, we need to turn inward and take responsibility for where we might have made a misstep or misread a situation. *You* are responsible for every step your company takes, whether a new hire doesn't work out or an investment fails. By taking ownership, you free yourself from paralyzing negative thoughts and give yourself the space to grow and make a plan for the future. And employees will follow that lead — they will see that your company is a place where mistakes can be made as long as you are willing to own up to and address them.

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A healthy company starts with a healthy leader

When you do not lead with transparency and ownership, you box yourself into a corner and will likely become isolated, frustrated and overwhelmed, and your mental health and the health of the company will suffer. The negative results might include increased employee turnover, lack of motivation, loss of staff confidence in you as a leader and worse.

If you are grappling with mental health issues right now, know

that you are not alone and that countless leaders before you have shared that struggle. Solutions can start small, so consider reaching out to one or two trusted advisors about what you are dealing with. Take ownership of the mistakes you might have made, and don’t be afraid to put aside ego and ask for help.

Remember: Just because you are the leader doesn’t mean you are impervious to adversity. You deserve support as much as anyone else, so take the action you need to get it.

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