

What Chadwick Boseman's Death Tells Us About Workplace Healthcare

Too often, the pressures of capitalism make the workplace a toxic environment for those diagnosed with cancer, especially Black people.

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Survival of the fittest is not just a Darwinian evolutionary theory: It's the simple fact that capitalism at its core favors the "best and brightest." The abrupt death of the great actor, Chadwick Boseman, revealed that he had been privately battling colon cancer for the past four years. Of note, colorectal cancers are the third leading cause of cancer deaths in the US.

Ironically, most of Chadwick's landmark movies inclusive of "Black Panther" were made during this period. This of course led me to ponder if this iconic actor would have been offered the same opportunities if he had revealed his health status. I believe the answer is no for several reasons, which I outline below.

Cancer mortality rates disproportionately plague Black men

First, we often assume that cancer is a death sentence. As a Yale-trained molecular oncologist, I know firsthand that early

diagnosis is typically correlated with better survival rates. Unfortunately, cancers are often diagnosed at more advanced stages for many people of color, particularly Black men, which inherently make treatments more difficult because of rapid spread.

In the case of colorectal cancer, the American Cancer Society reports that the number of new cases and deaths are highest among Black men who also tend to be diagnosed at a younger age and at a more advanced stage than other races. Furthermore, screening for this disease is lower in Black communities possibly due to an aversion to colonoscopies and other factors that may be related to lower socioeconomic factors. The implication is dire as ignorance can no longer be excused: Instead companies regardless of size must arm their managers with resources inclusive of credible medical information to ensure that workers regardless of health status or ethnicity receive optimal support.

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Secondly, it is evident that workers may choose to hide their health status to avoid punitive measures such as the inability to qualify for health insurance or being passed for promotions due to concerns about health. Ironically, to be able to secure benefits from the American Disability Association (ADA) and the Rehabilitation Act, one would need to reveal their health status to their employers. Per the U.S. Department of Labor: "An employer is only required to provide work-related accommodations if you disclose your disability to the appropriate individuals." Obviously, this becomes a "Catch-22" situation that is further exacerbated by the fact that we live in an increasingly virtual world that requires us to be "on"

all the time.

Some employees ignore or do not report illness

Third, we know innately that even the healthiest workers will have at least one sick day annually. Yet many will often push through their illness to alleviate worries and maximize team cohesion. In addition, many parents are now forced to do “double duty” as school teachers and remote workers. This fall, companies would have to dually manage flu season in addition to the global health crisis, which is unsettling for managers and workers alike. For employees to thrive in the “new normal,” managers must be more flexible in accommodating employee requests and providing an optimal environment for transparency and open communication.

Mental health issues also pose a major problem

Fourth, anxiety levels have surged amid the pandemic. It is important to highlight that mental health is a crucial component of our overall health and wellbeing. Unfortunately, African Americans are less likely than Whites to seek treatment for conditions such as anxiety and are also more likely to prematurely end treatment per data from the National Alliance on Mental Illness. One of the reasons for this disparity is the stigma often associated with mental health in Black communities. Fortunately, the use of telemedicine particularly for mental health management has surged amid the pandemic in response to workers, particularly Millennials, who are seeking solutions for heightened anxiety levels.

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It is human nature to seek a sense of belonging in the workplace. Yet, one in three African Americans say that they have felt out of place at work because of their race or ethnicity according to the Center for Talent Innovation. For employees to thrive in a workplace, they require support and recognition from their peers and managers alike. Moreover, work is not just about punching in the clock for most people. Work gives us a sense of purpose and when battling a chronic illness: It is this sense of purpose and support that motivates you to keep pushing daily against all odds.

Taken together, it is evident that the American workplace is one that has grappled with the socioeconomic, psychological, and physiological burden of the global health crisis. Recent events have also highlighted systemic and institutional racism in a gut-wrenching manner that has illuminated the challenges of ethnic minorities, particularly African Americans. Hence, American businesses are being forced to rethink their purpose. Maximizing shareholder value cannot be measured simply in terms of productivity and profitability. The new business paradigm prioritizes employee wellness above profits. The question remains on whether this “employee first” approach will remain, especially in a capitalist economy.

“Equality for All” in a time of heightened sociopolitical consciousness must also apply to those battling diseases including cancers and autoimmune disorders. We must no longer allow our workers particularly African Americans and other ethnic minorities to suffer silently. Support is key.

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