What Leaders Get Wrong About Mental Health



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After nearly two years of a global pandemic and its long list of negative side effects, our collective mental health has never been more fragile. McKinsey recently polled 5,000 Americans and found 37% of them were diagnosed with mental health issues or sought treatment for their mental health in 2021. With uncertainty surrounding the Omicron variant, people across the globe are suffering from what feels like an endless cycle of anxiety, depression and loss, not only for the millions who've lost their lives to the disease, but for the carefree way we used to live our lives.

One of the few silver linings of this devastating moment in time is marked progress with destigmatizing mental health. In the process of wreaking havoc on our lives, COVID has

catalyzed conversations about the importance of providing mental health support. Our recent study conducted by Forrester Consulting uncovered a lot of encouraging findings, including that 85% of C-level and HR leaders believe mental health is not just about mental illness, but something every employee has.

However, there's one statistic that is less encouraging: More than half (54%) of C-suite leaders think mental health benefits weren't available to employees in the past and shouldn't be a priority today. This cohort of leaders is in for a rude awakening.

The tide has turned

It's unequivocal. Mentions of mental health and burnout in Glassdoor reviews more than doubled during the pandemic and a recent study found the majority of knowledge workers — 69% of those who are remote and 61% of those in an office — believe that employee mental health is the shared responsibility of employees and their employer. This expectation is quickly becoming table stakes, especially among younger generations. In fact, according to our research, 86% of those aged 18-29 say they would be more likely to stay at a company that provides high-quality resources for them to care for their mental health. In the midst of the "Great Resignation" and with the war for talent heating up, this is a statistic that cannot be ignored.

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Gen-Z standards

Gen-Z adults, those ages 18 to 23, reported the highest levels of stress compared to other generations and were the most likely age group to report symptoms of depression, according

to the American Psychological Association's 2020 Stress in America survey. Since Gen Z will represent 82 million people by 2026 and soon make up a large and growing portion of the modern workforce, their needs and standards for mental health support should shape those of leadership. Our research found that their standard is getting higher and higher, with 41% of 18-29-year-olds saying they think mental health benefits will become a legal requirement for all employers within five years.

However, despite that prediction about the future, many still hesitate to share their concerns with their employers today. A 2021 Deloitte report found that only 4 in 10 Gen Z workers bring up mental health concerns to their managers, indicating a lasting stigma likely resulting from leaders' tendency to hold on to standards of the past.

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The right side of history

It's not uncommon for older generations to refer to "kids these days" as entitled or selfish, but considering Gen Z's lifetime of familiarity with digital disruption, there's a lot we can learn from them. And given this generation is going to be driving the future of business, we should be learning from them just as much as they are learning from us.

Every generation is defined by the major events that took place during their lifetime and after. Growing up in a post-9/11 world with cultural influences like Black Lives Matter and now a global pandemic, Gen Z has learned to adapt to disruption with agility. Case in point, remote work. Gen Z was quick to embrace the pandemic-driven trend, but with the caveat that work should also incorporate flexibility, autonomy and a focus on wellness. And frankly, these caveats make for better workers.

Our research found 67% of C-level leaders think mental health benefits would make employees more productive and 62% of managers and employees agree. With this in mind, along with the Great Resignation, which is still in full force according to new Labor Department data showing Americans quitting or changing jobs in near-record numbers, offering mental health support to employees is a no-brainer.

From baby boomers to Gen Z, every generation of employees has introduced new workplace standards. As leaders, it’s our responsibility to adapt, rather than hearken, back to the way things used to be.

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