Breaking the Stigma Around Mental Health Issues

Description

Part Two of a Six-Part Series
We live and work in challenging times. The scope, pace, and intensity of change have been increasing for years, even decades, and bringing greater stress with them. Obviously, the upheaval brought about by the past year and a half has turned the heat up even higher. Itâ??s not surprising that weâ??ve entered a mental health crisis. Thatâ??s why, as I mentioned last week, Iâ??m devoting a lot of time and resources to helping people navigate stress, burnout, and trauma inside their organizations.
In the previous column, we talked about the well-being spectrum and why itâ??s so important to assess where your organization is right now. This week Iâ??d like to talk about one of the biggest roadblocks we face in helping employees (and sometimes ourselves) replenish those emotional bank accounts.
Sometimes employees have mental health issues that require attention, but are reluctant to seek help. There are various reasons why, but one of the biggest ones is *stigma.*
Admitting that one is struggling with a mental health issue is stigmatized in many industries and organizations. Healthcare, which tends to have a â??just get over itâ?• culture, is one example. But this stigma can exist anywhere.
At times, people may not feel comfortable speaking up when they are struggling for fear they may be perceived as weak. This perpetuates a â??culture of silenceâ?• that can make people feel very alone. This was a problem even before COVID-19, but the isolating effects of the pandemic made it even worse.
In a perpetually stressful and busy â??all hands on deckâ?• environment, time off to rejuvenate and repair might be hard to come by. Plus, I think many people keep on keeping on simply because they care so much. Thatâ??s how mission-driven they are.
In addition, people also have real concerns about privacy. They donâ??t want mental health diagnoses on their record and worry about confidentiality issues. They may fear they will be penalized later. They also have added concerns about professional repercussions, as their mental health history could impact their careers.
Another issue Iâ??ve noticed is the â??resiliency misunderstanding.â?• A quick google search shows thereâ??s a lot of information out there on creating a more resilient workforce. Resiliency is important. But I find many people think it means they must push through, suck it up, and keep going no matter the circumstances. This misunderstanding can make them reluctant to admit they are not doing well. They push and donâ??t take care of themselves. They skip the self-care step.
Whether intentional or not, the messages people internalizeâ??â??toughen up, move through the pain, pull yourself up by your bootstraps,â?• and so forthâ??reinforce the stigma around anxiety, depression,

burnout, and other mental health issues. This promotes denial and discourages people from seeking much-needed help.

This is an even bigger issue for minorities (women and people of color). These populations are the most vulnerable, yet are often even more reluctant to ask for help. They donâ??t want to be seen as complainers. They already struggle with belonging. If theyâ??ve just gotten the job and are feeling isolated or excluded, they may try to tough it out due to a â??last hired, first firedâ?• concern.

Itâ??s also a generational problem. Young folks are less likely to endure and suffer through the way their predecessors did. They value quality of life. The long, irregular work hours and weekend calls that are normal in certain professions can sometimes interfere with that. Yet older employees may judge younger ones for being soft.

By the time the burnout, stress, and trauma manifests in the workplace, it is usually pretty serious. With many people, work is the last place the suffering manifests. By the time it shows up at work, the rest of their lives are probably in shambles. People will sacrifice in other areas of their lives to continue to perform at work. People equate success in life with success at work. As long as they are able to keep their job, they still think they are doing okay.

For all of these reasons, work needs to be the first line of defense. Healthy people create healthy organizations. This means it is urgent that we not only fix the systemic factors that work against wellness and create burnout, but that we get intentional and assertive about dismantling the culture of silence that keeps people trapped in unsustainable circumstances.

The first part of getting employees the help they need is being assertive about breaking down the stigma around stress, trauma, and other mental health issues. Make it very, very clear that it is not only â??okayâ?• to let you know when they are struggling, it is expected and urgent. People need to know itâ??s safe to ask for the care they need without negative consequences or jeopardy to their careers.

We have to be careful not to promote a â??sweep it under the rugâ?• mentality. The pace of business often promotes that mindset. We must acknowledge the reality of the struggle employees are having (stress, anxiety, accelerated pace of change). Until we do that part, we wonâ??t be in a good position to figure out just how serious the problem is inside our own organization.

Upcoming columns will address what we can do to break down stigma, promote wellness, and create the kinds of organizations where mental health issues and burnout are less likely to take hold. For instance, next week weâ??ll talk about why empathy is the number-one leadership skill for creating a culture of well-being. I look forward to connecting with you then.

*If youâ??d like to access a few relevant resourcesâ??*The Well-Being Handbook *(eBook)*, The Well-Being Tool Kit, *and* The Well-Being Video*â??please visit* https://thegratitudegroup.com/faculty/quint-studer/.

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