



How Can Leaders Combat Anxiety in the Workplace?

Description

Lately I've talked and written quite a bit about mental well-being at work. A big part of what's detracting from that sense of well-being is employee anxiety. It's not a new problem: Even before the pandemic of 2020, anxiety was crippling the performance of workers, especially young employees. Of course, it's much worse now—it's having a huge effect on productivity and leading to ghosting and burnout.

During the Gratitude Symposium this past summer, we had an interesting presentation on this subject by Chester Elton and Adrian Gostick. They are the *New York Times* best-selling authors of the new book *Anxiety at Work*. To listen to that conversation, titled *The Anxiety Solution: 8 Strategies to Help Teams Build Resilience, Handle Uncertainty, and Get Stuff Done*, click [here](#).

In addition, Mr. Elton will be presenting at [EntreCon](#) next week. His presentation will be held on Wednesday, November 17, from 3:15 to 4:15 p.m. Click [here](#) to learn more about him and his presentation, and [here](#) to register for EntreCon.

Employee anxiety has a huge impact on companies. A recent *Harvard Business Review* [article](#) reported that more employees than ever are leaving jobs due to mental health issues. The study it cites indicates that this is true of 68 percent of Millennials and 81 percent of Gen Zers. These statistics have gotten significantly worse since an initial study was done in 2019. In addition, the *HBR* article noted that C-level and executive respondents are now *more likely than others* to report struggling with mental health issues.

Now, if you're like many leaders, you might think dealing with this issue is the job of the EAP. But Mr. Elton and Mr. Gostick point out that even though mental health issues have gone through the roof during COVID-19, EAP usage has not increased. This is very telling. It shows that while many leaders are working hard to reduce the stigma in this area, we still have a ways to go. It also shows that helping employees deal with anxiety really *is* the leader's job.

So what *can* leaders do? Mr. Elton and Mr. Gostick share lots of insights around recognizing anxiety, alleviating stress, managing uncertainty, building resilience, and more. Here are a few of the most interesting points I've learned from them:

To combat “duck syndrome,” learn to recognize the hidden signs of anxiety. The authors say young people say they try to look like they’re just gliding along calmly on the lake, but underneath they’re paddling frantically to stay afloat. This means leaders need to get skilled at looking for clues that employees are struggling: Happy people are suddenly sad, vocal people are suddenly quiet, or people who rarely miss deadlines suddenly start missing them.

Normalize, destigmatize, empathize. Mr. Elton and Mr. Gostick say it’s critical to do these three things. Let people know anxiety is a normal human emotion and it’s okay to feel it (normalize and destigmatize). And when we empathize, we let people know we’ve been there too. Brené Brown says empathy is a “vulnerable choice.” She says it’s looking down at a person who is trapped in a deep hole and saying, “I know what it’s like down there, and you’re not alone.”

Hit the unknowns head-on. Few things cause more anxiety than unknowns. The authors note that 60 percent of American workers are concerned about their job security right now. It’s so important to help people deal with uncertainty. Answer questions like “Where are we headed as an organization? How am I doing? Am I living up to my goals? Do I have a future here?”

When you’re flying in formation and hit a rough patch, loosen your grip. Our impulse as leaders is to tighten up when we hit turbulence. But female fighter pilot Nicole Malachowski says it’s the worst thing you can do. It puts everyone in jeopardy. While it may seem counterintuitive, she says it’s actually better to loosen your grip, take an assessment, and ask people how it’s going and what they need to get through the rough patch. *Then* gain control.

Help people chart their path forward. Some organizations hold aspirational or development conversations with employees once a month. They provide honest feedback aimed at helping people grow and develop. It’s not *just* about the employee; they balance the discussion between how people can further their own career but also help the organization. This is a very powerful strategy: Mr. Elton and Mr. Gostick have worked with hospitals that have cut their turnover in half just by having these meetings once a month.

Know what motivates your employees. This is not always what you think, and it changes over the course of a career. When Mr. Elton and Mr. Gostick looked at young people between 20 and 29, they found their most motivating concepts were impact, learning, and family. Their least motivating concepts were autonomy and money! Older people are motivated by other things. The authors tell a story about a vice president who was motivated by pressure. This was definitely not true of some of her team members, and the disconnect was causing some issues. The Motivators Assessment at www.findmojo.com can help determine what motivates you and your team.

Use gratitude to help people break through perfectionism. In most cases (with exceptions for people like heart surgeons or pilots), we don’t want perfectionists. They have a hard time getting started and can’t always see when good enough is good enough. One way to help employees break through the need to be perfect (and counteract the imposter syndrome that can affect even the most talented) is to constantly help them see that you’re grateful for what they’re doing. Thank them frequently. Celebrate their achievements *now*—the closer the celebration is to the behavior, the better. It’s impossible to do this too often.

I’d like to close with a story Mr. Elton told that I loved. He said when he was growing up in Vancouver,

he and his dad happened to be walking through a rough neighborhood. His dad stopped to help a homeless woman pick up her stuff that had spilled out of her bag. He told his dad, “It’s probably not a good idea to touch these people because they’re not clean.” His dad said, “Chester, you be good to everybody. Everybody’s having a tough day.”

When we can remember that everybody’s having a tough day, it changes how we approach employees. We’ll be more likely to be attuned to signs of anxiety and help them deal with it and become more resilient. We’ll be more likely to take Brené Brown’s advice and move beyond sympathy to show empathy. We all feel anxiety. We all have a human responsibility to climb down in the darkness with people so they’ll know they’re not alone—and to do what we can to help them climb out.

If you’d like to access a few relevant resources—The Well-Being Handbook (eBook), The Well-Being Tool Kit, and The Well-Being Video—please visit <https://thegratitudigroup.com/faculty/quint-studer/>.

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